

**THE BEGINNINGS OF MYSTICAL
PHILOSOPHY IN AL-ANDALUS: IBN MASARRA
AND HIS *EPISTLE ON CONTEMPLATION****

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Introduction

Ibn Masarra, the first Muslim thinker in al-Andalus known to us, has been for centuries an enigma for Muslim chroniclers as well as for modern scholars. Although his crucial position in the study of the intellectual history of al-Andalus is uncontested, there is no agreement as to the nature and affiliation of his thought. The discovery of two of his writings some decades ago opened the way for a renewed interest in him. Since then, these two texts have been published and republished. But a comprehensive in-depth analysis and overview of his thought, anchored in these texts, has remained a desideratum. By offering in the following pages an annotated English translation of one of these extant texts, we present here the first part of our attempt at such an analysis.

Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Jabalī, known as Ibn Masarra, was born in Cordoba in 269/883. His father ‘Abd Allāh traveled to the East, and had been to Baṣra, where he is said to have studied with Mu‘tazilī theologians, and died in Mecca in 286/899. Muḥammad b. Masarra himself, after having been schooled by his father and by two Mālikī jurists, also went to Mecca, stopping in Qayrawān, where he attended the lessons of a famous jurist. It is assumed that he had to leave al-Andalus due to being denounced there for religious subversion.¹ In Mecca, he possibly

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¹For a detailed summary of the biographical material culled from the primary sources, see M. Asín Palacios, *Abenmasarra y su escuela*; references henceforward

frequented the circle of Abū Saʿīd b. al-Aʿrābī, a former disciple of al-Junayd in Baghdad, as did many of the Andalusīs who came to Mecca.² He returned to al-Andalus during the reign of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III al-Nāṣir (300/912–350/962) and drew around him a circle of disciples who were attracted to him for his eloquent teaching as well as for his austere and ascetic life. It is said that Ibn Masarra, together with his disciples, withdrew to the mountains around Cordoba, hence his nickname *al-jabalī*. He died in his mountainous retreat in 319/931. Posthumously, several caliphal decrees against Ibn Masarra’s followers were publicly circulated: these followers were accused of reprehensible innovation and heresy, their books were burnt and they were forced to repent.³

Muslim historiographers describe Ibn Masarra as a legal authority (*faqīh*). But they also say other things about him, which suggest more philosophical interests: that he held views close to those of the Muʿtazila; it is insinuated that he made use of logic; and that he was a *bāṭinī*. As mentioned above, our sources suggest encounter with Muʿtazilī ideas, either directly or through his father. But he is also said to have been influenced by the teachings of some ninth-century Ṣūfis.⁴

The seemingly contradictory information provided by medieval Muslim historiographers is reflected also in modern scholarship, where many speculations concerning the makeup of Ibn Masarra’s intellectual world have been published. He is variously described as a Muʿtazilī theologian, a Ṣūfī mystic, a neoplatonist philosopher with *bāṭinī* inclinations, a follower (or the founder) of the so-called pseudo-Empedocles school, a

are to the English translation: *The mystical philosophy of Ibn Masarra*, chapter III, pp. 30–42. See also J. Vahid Brown, “Muḥammad b. Masarra al-Jabalī and his place in medieval Islamic intellectual history: towards a reappraisal,” Thesis presented to the Division of Philosophy, Religion and Psychology, Reed College, August 2006. We wish to thank J. Vahid Brown for making his work available to us.

²On him, see M. Marín, “Abū Saʿīd Ibn al-Aʿrābī et le développement du sufisme dans al-Andalus,” pp. 28–38.

³See M. Fierro, “Bāṭinism in al-Andalus,” p. 98.

⁴A reference to the possible influence on Ibn Masarra of Dhū al-Nūn al-Ikhmīmī (d. 245/860) and of Abū Yaʿqūb al-Nahrajūrī (d. 330/941) — notably in ethical and psychological matters — can be found in Ibn al-Farādī, *Taʾrīkh ʿulamāʾ al-Andalus*, pp. 323–324 (no. 1204); see also al-Khushanī, *Akhhār al-fuqahāʾ wa-l-muḥaddithīn*, p. 162. Of these two eastern Ṣūfis, the probability of a meeting lies only with al-Nahrajūrī, Ibn Masarra’s contemporary, who had left Baghdad and moved to Mecca after al-Junayd’s death in 298/910 and al-Ḥallāj’s execution in 309/922. As for Sahl al-Tustarī’s influence, see below, n. 39. For Ibn Masarra’s biography and teachings according to the Muslim sources, see, for instance, Asín Palacios, *The mystical philosophy of Ibn Masarra*, chapters III and VI; Vahid Brown, “Muḥammad b. Masarra al-Jabalī and his place in medieval Islamic intellectual history”; S. Stroumsa, “Ibn Masarra and the beginnings of mystical thought in al-Andalus”; Cruz Hernández, *Historia del pensamiento en el mundo islámico: 2. El pensamiento de al-Andalus (siglos IX–XIV)*, pp. 344–352; E. Tornero, “A report on the publication of previously unedited works by Ibn Masarra.”

Fātimī missionary, or a number of combinations of the above-mentioned possibilities.⁵

Ibn Masarra's own writings were considered lost until 1972, when Muḥammad Kamāl Ibrāhīm Ja'far discovered two of his works in manuscript no. 3168 of the Chester Beatty Collection:⁶ *The book of the properties of letters* (*Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*) and *The epistle on contemplation* (*Risālat al-i'tibār*).⁷ These he published in 1978,⁸ but it took time for his publication to gain the attention of the scholarly world. In the last decades, however, several scholars have addressed themselves to Ibn Masarra's works. After the initial publication by Ja'far, the texts were republished by Ja'far himself⁹ as well as by J. Kenny¹⁰ and by P. Garrido Clemente.¹¹ The most recent edition of the texts, by Garrido Clemente, was prompted by her evaluation of the shortcomings of the previous editions,¹² an evaluation with which we concur. It should be noted, however, that all these editions are based on the only extant, 13th-century manuscript, which at times lacks diacritical points and is occasionally corrupt. As is well known to any one who has worked with a *unicum*, the pitfalls and lacunae of such a manuscript may be noticed only when one tries to rephrase its contents or to translate it. This is also the best way to acquire an in-depth understanding of the author's intents.

Furthermore, Ibn Masarra's extant works represent the earliest ex-

⁵For scholarly evaluations of Ibn Masarra's thought, see Asín Palacios, *The mystical philosophy of Ibn Masarra, passim*; S. Stroumsa, "Ibn Masarra and the beginnings of mystical thought in al-Andalus"; Cruz Hernández, *Historia del pensamiento en el mundo islámico: 2. El pensamiento de al-Andalus (siglos IX–XIV)*, pp. 344–352; Tornero, "A report on the publication of previously unedited works by Ibn Masarra"; C. Addas, "Andalusī mysticism and the rise of Ibn 'Arabī," pp. 913–919.

⁶See Ja'far, Muḥammad Kamāl Ibrāhīm, "Min mu'allafāt Ibn Masarra al-mafqūda"; A.J. Arberry, *The Chester Beatty Library*, vol. 1, pp. 68–69. We wish to express our thanks to the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin for the permission to use the manuscript.

⁷As discussed by Ja'far, *Risālat al-i'tibār* is probably identical with the work which some sources mention by the title of *Kitāb al-taṣīra*; see Ja'far, *Min qadāyā al-fikr al-islāmī*, pp. 300–306; on the titles of Ibn Masarra's works according to Andalusī sources, see also Asín Palacios, *The mystical philosophy of Ibn Masarra*, p. 41, note 23.

⁸See Ja'far, *Min qadāyā al-fikr al-islāmī*, pp. 311–360.

⁹Ja'far, *Min al-turāth al-falsafī li-Ibn Masarra*, pp. 24–40, 75–110.

¹⁰J. Kenny, "Ibn-Masarra: his *Risāla al-i'tibār*." We wish to thank Geneviève Gobillot for her kind help in obtaining a copy of this publication.

¹¹See P. Garrido Clemente, "Edición crítica de la *Risālat al-I'tibār* de Ibn Masarra de Córdoba" and "Edición crítica del *K. Jawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf* de Ibn Masarra." We wish to thank Maribel Fierro and Sabine Schmidtke for their kind help in procuring copies of Garrido Clemente's articles.

¹²See Garrido Clemente, "Edición crítica del *K. Jawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf* de Ibn Masarra," pp. 52–53.

amples of Andalusī speculative thought. Despite their brevity, their complexity testifies to a particular model of mystical philosophy which later on became current and prominent in al-Andalus. An accurate reading and a meticulous analysis of these texts is therefore crucial not only for establishing a coherent profile of Ibn Masarra's thought, but also for the reconstruction of the complexities of the formative period of the Andalusī intellectual world. This is why we offer in what follows a translation of *Risālat al-iʿtibār* (*The epistle on contemplation*), the shorter of the two epistles, accompanied by a detailed commentary.

In this treatise, Ibn Masarra lays out contemplation (*iʿtibār*) as a mental practice which leads the contemplator in an ascending order through the different levels of existence to the uppermost levels of knowledge and to an encounter with his Creator. Each level, in its turn, indicates its dependency upon the level above it. This hierarchical process culminates in the realization of the existence of a superior, transcendent being who is the wise, powerful and sole creator and governor of the universe as described in the Qurʾān. The main thesis of this epistle, presented from the outset, is the agreement of intellectual contemplation and revelation. In *Epistle on contemplation*, Ibn Masarra states this thesis in an unusually forceful and clear way and ties it with the notion of an inner seeing (*baṣīra*), a term which may easily be identified as Ṣūfī, but ultimately owes more to neoplatonic teachings.¹³ His emphatic formulation of this thesis introduces a line of thought which was to gain particular popularity among Andalusī philosophers, and which is attested in the writings of Ibn al-Sīd al-Baṭalyawsī and Ibn Ṭufayl, Ibn Rushd and Maimonides.¹⁴

Ibn Masarra's *iʿtibār*

While the notion of *iʿtibār* is widespread and its religious importance is stressed by authors of different schools, Ibn Masarra stands out in the method of contemplation which he proposes. Ibn Masarra seems to be familiar with the common understanding of *iʿtibār* as “drawing

¹³On Ibn Masarra's terminology, see below, at note 37.

¹⁴On the prominence of this theme in Andalusī philosophy, see Jaʿfar, *Min qaḍāyā al-fikr al-islāmī*, pp. 159–221; Asín Palacios, “La tesis de la necesidad de la revelación en el Islam y en la Escolástica”; see also Tornero, “Cuestiones filosóficas del Kitāb al-Masāʾil de Ibn al-Sīd de Badajoz,” p. 17; see also A. Eliyahu, *Ibn al-Sīd al-Baṭalyawsī and his place in medieval Muslim and Jewish thought*, especially chapter 5: “Religion and philosophy in *Kitāb al-dawāʾir* and in “The epistle on religion and philosophy” in *Kitāb al-masāʾil*”; and see below, “Ibn Masarra's scriptural language.”

a lesson.”¹⁵ But, as we shall presently show, he develops an original interpretation of *iʿtibār* in a neoplatonic framework.¹⁶ Ibn Masarra’s contemplative practice runs as follows:

The contemplator starts with observing the vegetative world; he notices the plurality and differentiation which is evident in each plant. Although the plant is fed by one and the same source of water (*yusqā bi-māʾ wāḥid*), it develops flowers and stems, leaves and roots of various textures, colors and scents. He also observes that water goes upwards and sideways to feed the different parts of the plant, although the natural disposition of water is to flow downwards. He considers the possibility that what is in action here is another element, such as fire that goes naturally upwards. But no fire is involved in these phenomena. He goes on to observe all the four elements, but they, too, do not provide him with convincing explanations. He thus rules out this possibility and concludes that water, as well as the other three elements, requires something which will force it to go up against its nature; hence this force must be one that is capable of bringing opposing and conflicting pulls together (*muʿallif al-aḍḍād*). Since nature cannot do this, he concludes that nature (*ṭabīʿa*) has limited power and is, therefore, subject to something more powerful. In the search of the more powerful force, he finds it is necessary to ascend in his observation to a higher level, above the level of nature. Hence he lifts his mental gaze upwards and there, too, he finds plurality: a multitude of heavenly bodies, stars and firmaments. All these celestial bodies, he finds, are harnessed by some governing power to which they are subjugated (*mazmūma musakkhkhara*). It thus follows that this level, too, has above it a power which governs and encompasses it (*mudabbir, muḥīṭ*). He then observes that all these beings are endowed with movement and vitality; this indicates that there exists in them a living spirit (*rūḥ ḥayawāniyya*). It becomes evident, therefore, that above the levels of existence observed thus far there lays a sphere that encompasses all of them and endows them with this vitality; this, he concludes, is the sphere of the soul (*falak al-naḥs*), the great soul (*al-naḥs al-kubrā*).

In his contemplation, however, he recognizes that all the individual souls, which stem (as the text implies) from the great soul and correspond to it, are inherently deficient and susceptible to being controlled and subjugated. It follows that the great soul, too, is deficient, subjugated

¹⁵ In this sense *iʿtibār* can be used religiously, morally, scientifically or historically; on this, see W.Z. Harvey, “Averroes and Maimonides on the duty of philosophical contemplation (*iʿtibār*)”; see also Jaʿfar, *Min qaḍāyā al-fikr al-islāmī*, pp. 301–306.

¹⁶ Note that *iʿtibār* does not have for him the meaning of “symbolic transposition” which may be found in Ibn Barrajān and Ibn al-ʿArabī — cf. D. Gril, “L’interprétation par transposition symbolique (*iʿtibār*),” pp. 149–152; also Garrido Clemente, “Traducción anotada de la *Risālat al-Iʿtibār* de Ibn Masarra de Córdoba,” p. 147.

and controlled. It lacks the power to make free choices; its choices and will are dictated to it by a higher power which governs its conduct.¹⁷ From this power all knowledge, understanding, reasoning and insights derive. This, he concludes, is the sphere of the intellect (*ḥalāk al-ʿaql*).

The intellect, however, being closely tied to the soul, suffers from similar blemishes and limitations as the soul does. It is sometimes possessed by fleeting, inconsequential thoughts (*ḥawāṭir*) and its ideas and moral judgment are not of its essence, but imposed on it. This indicates to the contemplator that there exists yet a higher governing power who rules over the intellect, as well as over everything below it.

This higher ruler (*al-mālik al-ʿalā*) is totally transcendent. Unlike all the lower spheres, which encompass each other and correspond to each other, this ruler, although encompassing everything, does not correspond to and has no direct contact with anything. His complete transcendence renders him inaccessible to direct contemplation. Such transcendence implies that no analogies or similitudes apply to this highest ruler. The contemplator finds, therefore, that “nothing is like unto Him” (Qurʾān 58:7). But since all levels of existence are interconnected in an uninterrupted hierarchical chain, the contemplator realizes that this higher ruler can be attained by means of His traces and signs (*āthār, āyāt*), which descend upon the intellect and upon everything beneath it.

At this point, describing the culmination of the contemplative process, Ibn Masarra’s language reflects a blend of mystical experience with philosophical observations: The contemplator finds his Lord and Creator and meets Him in his self; he sees Him with his inner vision (*baṣīra*); he beholds His innermost court (*ṣaḥat al-qurb*). At the same time he also realizes that God’s entire kingdom is bound by His harness, under His governance (*tadbīr*), constrained by His will and volition.

As mentioned above, the notion of *iʿtibār* is a common feature in medieval Arabic sources. In many theological, philosophical and hermeneutic sources, as well as in some early Ṣūfī writings, *iʿtibār* is understood as the call to observe creation and all its multiple phenomena and wonders in order to witness God’s greatness and wisdom. A well-known exposition of *iʿtibār* can be found in a treatise which has become known as “Pseudo-Jāḥiẓ,” an early theological work of Christian origin.¹⁸ *Iʿtibār* is also found frequently in Muslim and Jewish theological works. It is also attested in certain early Ṣūfī texts, especially those which advocate the use of the intellect in the pursuit of knowledge of things divine. The philosophical tradition also develops this notion. Particularly noteworthy

¹⁷For Asín Palacio’s misrepresentation of the soul’s nature, see commentary to paragraphs 27–28.

¹⁸See *Kitāb al-dalāʾil wa-ʾl-iʿtibār ʿalā al-khalq wa-ʾl-tadbīr*, attributed to the Muslim theologian and litterateur ʿAmr b. Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/869).

thy are some thinkers as, for example, al-Ghazālī and Ibn Rushd, who insist that drawing lessons from the created world is a religious obligation.¹⁹

Against this background, Ibn Masarra stands out in a different and original elaboration of this concept. Unlike the prevalent treatment of *iʿtibār*, where the emphasis is on multiple created phenomena, Ibn Masarra constructs a hierarchical system of existence which the contemplator must follow systematically in an ascending order. His contemplation does not move from one phenomenon to another disjointedly, but rather arranges creation in a cohesive, interdependent sequence which progresses from the lowest to the highest. This “vertical” contemplation is part and parcel of Ibn Masarra’s neoplatonic world-view.

Ibn Masarra’s neoplatonism

“The world” says Ibn Masarra, “with all its creatures and signs, is a ladder (*daraj*) by which those who contemplate ascend to the great signs of God on high” (*Epistle on contemplation*, paragraph 9). The purpose of this type of contemplation, beyond recognizing the Creator, is also the recognition of the universal chain of being. His contemplative journey as it unfolds in the *Epistle on contemplation* follows a neoplatonic track which climbs up through the rungs of Nature, the Universal Soul, the Universal Intellect and finally the One, the Creator.²⁰

The image of a ladder, which frequently appears in medieval Muslim and Jewish sources, was examined by Alexander Altmann. The material gathered by Altmann makes evident the neoplatonic provenance of this image. According to Altmann, this image “is neoplatonic in character, and for this reason it made an impact on medieval Jewish philosophers and mystics.”²¹ Ibn Masarra’s concept of the contemplative ladder indeed links him with a long chain of mystical philosophers and is typical of Andalusī medieval spirituality. In his use of this image he predates all the medieval sources cited by Altmann, thus suggesting a common neoplatonic “pre-history” of both Islamic and Jewish mystical-philosophical systems in al-Andalus.²²

Asín Palacios, who in 1914 published his *Abenmassara y su escuela*, tried to reconstruct Ibn Masarra’s thought despite the fact that he did

¹⁹For comparative material, see commentary to paragraphs 5, 8.

²⁰See Asín Palacios, *The mystical philosophy of Ibn Masarra*, especially p. 65.

²¹See A. Altmann “The ladder of ascension,” pp. 1–32, on p. 4.

²²See also below, at note 48.

not have access to any of Ibn Masarra's writings; this he did on the basis of medieval historiographers who cite and paraphrase Ibn Masarra. Underlying Ibn Masarra's philosophy, Asín saw late antique neoplatonic elaborations which circulated in the Islamic world.²³ As typical of such elaborations, Asín suggested the theory of the "five substances" and the book which is said to bear its name. Following Solomon Munk and David Kaufmann, on whose suggestions he elaborated, Asín identified this theory as deriving from the so-called pseudo-Empedocles.²⁴ Elaborating on al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153) and al-Shahrazūrī (died at the end of 13th century), Asín lists the following emanations as these five substances: prime or spiritual matter, universal intellect, universal soul, nature and secondary matter.²⁵ For Asín, the most notable element in the pseudo-Empedoclean neoplatonic version is "primal matter," "which," he says, "comes to occupy the ultimate grade of the hierarchy," replacing the One in the hierarchy of the five substances.²⁶ In Ibn Masarra's extant writings there is no mention of prime, spiritual matter as such, although we do find in his *Book of letters* the concept of "primordial dust" (*habāʿ*), which plays an important role in his cosmogony.²⁷ It should be noted, however, that there are also other lists of the five substances; in *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*, for example, the first item on the list is divine will (*irāda*).²⁸ This latter concept plays a central role in Ibn Masarra's thought. Onto the elementary list of neoplatonic hypostases, Ibn Masarra adds the complex notion of God's will (*irāda wa-mashīʿa*) and incorporates it into his philosophical system. Divine will is sometimes identified with the *logos* (*kalima*) or with the divine command (*amr*).²⁹ These notions have become typical of the monotheistic versions of neoplatonism, especially via

²³See M. Asín Palacios, *The mystical philosophy of Ibn Masarra*, pp. 68–69.

²⁴See S. Munk, *Mélanges de philosophie juive et arabe*, pp. 240–245; D. Kaufmann, *Studien über Salomon ibn Gabirol*, pp. 1–12; Asín Palacios, *The mystical philosophy of Ibn Masarra*, pp. 129–133; also J. Schlanger, *La philosophie de Salomon Ibn Gabirol: études d'un néoplatonisme*, pp. 76–88.

²⁵See Asín Palacios, *The mystical philosophy of Ibn Masarra*, pp. 51–58.

²⁶See *ibid.*, pp. 65–66; see also Schlanger, *op. cit.*, pp. 88–94.

²⁷We intend to discuss this concept and its complex comparative material in the context of an analysis of the *Book of letters*.

²⁸See pseudo-Majrīṭī, *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*, p. 285 ll. 9–10; De Smet, *Empedocles Arabus*, p. 100. The *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*, known to the Latins as *Picatrix*, is a magical-astrological treatise, with strong neoplatonic leanings, contemporary to Ibn Masarra or slightly later; for its dating and authorship, see M. Fierro, "Bāṭinism in al-Andalus."

²⁹Both these terms appear in Ibn Masarra's writings, especially in the *Book of letters*, where he identifies the *kalima* with God's command and with the creating *kun*; see, for instance, *Book of letters*, Jaʿfar, pp. 311, 334, 338. On the Shīʿī-Ismāʿīlī echoes of these terms, see S. Pines, "Shīʿite terms and conceptions in Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*," pp. 165–251.

the longer version of the so-called *Theology of Aristotle*.³⁰

Asín's identification of Ibn Masarra as a follower of pseudo-Empedocles was flatly rejected as "an illusion" by Samuel Miklós Stern.³¹ Similar criticism was leveled against Asín by Daniel De Smet and by J. Vahid Brown, who further elaborated on the pseudo-Empedocles enigma.³² Stern, like Asín, had no access to any of Ibn Masarra's writings. De Smet, who did examine Ibn Masarra's texts, which in the meantime had been published by Ja'far, concluded that "these texts do not offer any positive link with the Arab Empedocles."³³

We believe that scholarly focus on Empedocles, be it the Greek Empedocles, the Arab Empedocles or the pseudo-Empedocles, has detracted attention from the main issue at hand, namely what Ibn Masarra says. It has also blurred scholars' vision, and thus hindered them from recognizing Asín's correct estimation that Ibn Masarra adhered intellectually to one or another of the neoplatonic versions inherited from Late Antiquity which circulated in Arabic. Indeed, re-reading Asín's statements against the background of the current consensual criticism of his ideas, we were surprised to find that, despite the absence of Ibn Masarra's texts, and regardless of many outlandish ideas fed by prejudices, Asín was not as wide of the mark as some later scholars have argued.³⁴ Contrary to Stern's blunt statement that Ibn Masarra "was a Šūfī, not a neoplatonic philosopher,"³⁵ our analysis of Ibn Masarra's texts, both

³⁰See S. Pines, "La longue récénsion de la théologie d'Aristote, dans ses rapports avec la doctrine ismaélienne"; F.W. Zimmermann, "The origins of the so-called *Theology of Aristotle*"; P.B. Fenton, "The Arabic and Hebrew versions of the *Theology of Aristotle*"; see also J. Vahid Brown, "Andalusī mysticism: a recontextualization," p. 78 and note 29. On this seminal text, see also P. Adamson, *The Arabic Plotinus: a philosophical study of the "Theology of Aristotle"*; D. Gutas, "The text of the Arabic Plotinus. Prolegomena to a critical edition," pp. 371–384.

³¹ See S.M. Stern, "Ibn Masarra, follower of Pseudo-Empedocles — an illusion."

³² See De Smet, *Empedocles Arabus*; see also J. Vahid Brown, "Andalusī mysticism: a recontextualization," especially p. 76 and note 24; see also S. Stroumsa's review of De Smet's book, pp. 94–98.

³³See De Smet, *Empedocles Arabus*, p. 19.

³⁴See, for example, J. Vahid Brown, *op. cit.*, note 24 on p. 76: Brown writes that Ibn Masarra's treatises "unequivocally disprove Asín's admittedly hypothetical 'reconstruction' in nearly every respect"; for J. Vahid Brown's strong criticism of "Asín's far-reaching claims for the influence of Ibn Masarran pseudo-Empedocleanism," and for the influence that Asín's theories had on later scholars, see J. Vahid Brown, "Muḥammad b. Masarra al-Jabalī and his place in Medieval Islamic intellectual history," p. 12.

³⁵See Stern, *op. cit.*, p. 327; see also p. 326, where Stern criticizes Šā'id al-Andalusī for misinterpreting what he had found in al-ʿĀmirī; according to Stern, Šā'id "thoughtlessly interpolated the sentence: '... b. Masarra, the Batinite [i.e. Šūfī]. . . was greatly attached to philosophy'." Stern's words, including his inserted clarification in parenthesis, show that he takes it for granted that being a *bāṭinī* is equivalent to being a Šūfī; since, to Stern, this precludes a philosophical affiliation, Šā'id must

the *Epistle on contemplation* and the *Book of letters*, shows the extent to which he was immersed in a particular neoplatonic world-view. Not only the clear neoplatonic scheme of the *Epistle on contemplation*; letter speculations of the kind developed by Ibn Masarra in his *Book of letters* are also a product of this brand of neoplatonism.³⁶ As for “Šūfī,” our analysis has identified in Ibn Masarra’s works no terms or traits which are unequivocally Šūfī. Terms such as *baṣīra*, *awliyā’*, *qalb* and *nūr*, which led scholars to suggest a Šūfī identification, point, in fact, to contemporary trends of mystical philosophy anchored in late Arabic neoplatonism.³⁷ This applies also to the appellation *bāṭinī* used by Ibn Šā’id and others to describe Ibn Masarra, and which erroneously led Stern to identify Ibn Masarra as a Šūfī.³⁸ Scholars who see in Ibn Masarra a Šūfī also rely on the fact that, in the *Book of letters*, Ibn Masarra cites Sahl al-Tustarī, a well-known ninth-century Šūfī. Whatever the introduction of Sahl’s name by Ibn Masarra may imply, it does not detract from Ibn Masarra’s obvious neoplatonic makeup as manifested in both works available to us.³⁹

have got it wrong. Contrary to Stern, we find that Šā’id’s use of the term *bāṭinī* reflects a correct evaluation of Ibn Masarra’s mystical philosophy. On this, see also Tornero, who concludes that “Ibn Masarra was a neo-Platonic philosopher, and not just a Šūfī”: E. Tornero, “A report on the publication of previously unedited works by Ibn Masarra,” p. 149.

³⁶We intend to offer a close analysis of the *Book of letters* in a future publication, where we hope to discuss the neoplatonic background of Ibn Masarra’s letter mysticism.

³⁷As our commentary to the *Epistle on contemplation* shows, these terms are found in abundance in the *Epistles of the pure brethren*. These epistles are usually thought to have been composed later than Ibn Masarra. However, the striking similarities in both language and ideas with Ibn Masarra’s texts strongly suggest a common intellectual milieu which produced them both.

³⁸See above, note 31.

³⁹For the dependence of Ibn Masarra on Sahl al-Tustarī, see Asín Palacios (who relies on Ibn al-‘Arabī), *The mystical philosophy of Ibn Masarra*, pp. 87–88, 127; also D. Gril, “L’interprétation par transposition symbolique (*i’tibār*),” pp. 148–150; also Garrido Clemente, “El tratado de las letras (*Risālat al-ḥurūf*) del Sufī Sahl al-Tustarī.” It should be noted that the epistle, which appears in the same manuscript as the texts of Ibn Masarra (Chester Beatty 3168, ff. 166–174) is actually untitled and with no mention of an author. Ja’far, who found the manuscript, ascribed it to Sahl al-Tustarī who is cited in the first lines of the epistle. This citation also appears in Ibn Masarra’s *Book of letters*, hence Ja’far’s ascription. However, this untitled epistle, whoever its author, presents a type of letter speculation which is strikingly at odds with the Sahl tradition borne out by most Šūfī sources, even where enigmatic letters and divine names are concerned. It is likely, therefore, that the ascription is erroneous; on this, note Böwering’s hesitation, in G. Böwering, *The mystical vision of existence in classical Islam. The Qur’ānic hermeneutics of the Sufī Sahl al-Tustarī* (d. 283/896), pp. 17–18; see also M. Ebstein and S. Sviri, “The so-called *Risālat al-ḥurūf* (*Epistle on letters*) ascribed to Sahl al-Tustarī and letter mysticism in al-Andalus,” forthcoming. For Ja’far’s publication and analysis of this text, see *idem*,

The neoplatonic world-view of Ibn Masarra is typically Andalusī, as can be seen from a comparison with such writings as *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* and, from later periods, those of the Muslim authors al-Baṭalyawsī and Ibn Ṭufayl as well as of Jewish authors such as Ibn Gabirol and Judah Ha-Levi. This type of Andalusī “mystical philosophy”, which owes so much to neoplatonism, culminated in the highly sophisticated oeuvre of Ibn al-‘Arabī, an oeuvre which weaves together mysticism with philosophy and in which neoplatonic notions and structures are undeniably present.⁴⁰ It is possible that, by assimilation, the fact that Ibn al-‘Arabī has been universally recognized as a Ṣūfī, has reflected also on the identification of Ibn Masarra as one.

Ibn Masarra’s scriptural language

Ibn Masarra’s contemplative journey, while following a neoplatonic track, moves also through a terrain which is demarcated by the Qur’ān. The purpose of Ibn Masarra’s treatise is to show the agreement of the product of ascending intellectual contemplation with the divine message which had descended from above upon the prophets. The effort to bring together divine revelation and speculative thought is commonplace in this period, as is well attested in contemporary *kalām* and philosophical literatures.⁴¹ Ibn Masarra’s works, however, stand out as an early systematic attempt at viewing scriptural language in correspondence with philosophical terminology, thus translating Qur’ānic narratives into philosophical structures.⁴²

The process of contemplation as a whole follows the scriptural model of Abraham. According to the Qur’ān, Abraham came to know God after observing the successive decline of the heavenly bodies, thus realizing their limitations and transiency (Qur’ān 6:75–9).⁴³ Although Ibn

Min al-turāth al-Ṣūfī li-Sahl b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Tustarī.

⁴⁰See A.E. Affi, *The mystical philosophy of Muḥyid Dīn-Ibn al-‘Arabī*, in particular Appendix: “The sources of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s system: (a): Ibn al-‘Arabī and Ibn Masarra,” pp. 178–183. This Appendix contains an insightful summary of the pseudo-Empedocles question.

⁴¹See above, note 15.

⁴²See, for example, his identification of the universal intellect (‘aql) with the throne (‘arsh, see paragraph 29).

⁴³For early antecedents of this Qur’ānic passage in Jewish and Christian sources, see L. Ginzberg, *The legends of the Jews*, vol. 1, pp. 189, 212–213, 303–306 and vol. 5, pp. 210, 217–218, 229–230; see also D. Sidersky, *Les origines des légendes musulmanes dans le Coran et dans les vies des prophètes*, pp. 35–36; see also commentary to paragraph 21.

Masarra does not explicitly cite this Qur'ānic passage, he has it clearly in mind when he speaks of "...the prophecy of Abraham, peace be upon him, contemplating the kingdom's created things (*i'tibār khalā'iq al-malakūt*) in search of indication for his Creator" (paragraph 39).⁴⁴

Beyond these particular lines, the Qur'ānic narrative of Abraham's search is echoed throughout Ibn Masarra's epistle. It is noteworthy that Abraham's name, which appears towards the end of the epistle, is the only name mentioned in it. Ibn Masarra's process is similar to Abraham's in yet another significant point: unlike most neoplatonists, whose descriptions of the hypostases move from above downwards, and as such from the more luminous and full of splendor to the darker and coarser, Ibn Masarra, like Abraham, moves from the lower and more subjugated levels of existence to the higher, more powerful ones. This entirely changes the axis of the contemplative process as well as its vocabulary. First, we do not find here the abundance of light imagery typical to most neoplatonic writings (such as Ibn Masarra's Jewish contemporary Isaac Israeli); second, the focus is on the human intellectual effort involved in the quest, an effort for which all human beings are prepared by means of innate nature (*fiṭra*). The descriptions of certitude (*yaqīn*), revelation, reward and luminosity follow the effort rather than precede it.

The *Epistle on contemplation* is also suffused with eschatological anticipations couched in scriptural language. Being a religious practice ordained by God, sincere contemplation promises God's reward (*jazā'*), protection (*kanf*) and nearness (*wilāya*) in the hereafter. The possibility of attaining God's nearness and protection as an outcome of contemplation, as well as the eschatological promises, reflect Ibn Masarra's inherently optimistic view of the world: It is a world governed by a generous and wise Creator, who rules over creation and its inhabitants with their benefit in view, in both this world and in the hereafter.

Insincere intention or false pretence, on the other hand, leads to perdition in "the great fire." This, says Ibn Masarra, is the lot of the "those who speak pretentiously, called philosophers" (paragraph 39). This judgmental statement does not necessarily relate to all philosophers as such; in the *Book of letters* he speaks highly about "the philosophers and the ancients of the erring nations, people of the periods of interval [between prophets] who, without prophecy, attained the knowledge of God's unity" (*Book of letters*, Ja'far, p. 315). The distinction between these two types of philosophers hinges upon their sincerity and firm intention.

⁴⁴For a reference to Abraham and Qur'ān 6:75 in *Rasā'il ikhwān al-ṣafā'*, see vol. 1, p. 159. For the concept of "indication" (*dalīl*) and "seeking proof by indication" (*istidlāl*), see commentary to paragraph 11.

The literary structure of *Risālat al-iʿtibār*

Beyond the conceptual analysis of Ibn Masarra's ideas, attention should be drawn also to the masterful literary structure which this epistle presents. Ibn Masarra's thought follows three parallel tracks: the individual process of contemplation, the philosophical neoplatonic scheme, and the scriptural dimension. Ibn Masarra seems to be well aware of the need to present these three tracks in a cohesive manner; it is evident that the epistle is carefully thought out and is not a free-flowing stream of disjointed ideas. Ibn Masarra may begin an idea, introducing it in philosophical language; then develop it, concluding with a verse that, according to him, says the same thing in scriptural language. It is not rare to find that this closing verse introduces an additional dimension which was not present in the philosophical terminology. This added dimension may then be found in the opening lines of the next philosophical topic. As we have already pointed out, the wish to highlight philosophical ideas with scriptural prooftexts is a commonplace in medieval philosophical writings. But what makes Ibn Masarra's epistle stand out is the way he artfully weaves together the various elements into a densely-knit fabric within the concise space in which his thoughts unfold.

Ibn Masarra often introduces a term or an image, then leaves it aside only to pick it up again in order to tie it in with the next idea. This gives the epistle a tight, cohesive structure which helps Ibn Masarra to bring out his vision of existence as a closed, interrelated unity. The starting point of the epistle is the question whether an indication of God's oneness by mental contemplation is at all possible. Its culmination is a triumphal vision of the attainments of sincere mental contemplation: the admittance of the intellect to God's nearness and the divine marvels that are revealed to it. This "mystical" conclusion of the initial philosophical question thus closes the circle of the quest. The literary, circular structure which Ibn Masarra creates corresponds to the recurring theme of encompassing circles which prevail everywhere in creation, a theme so fundamental to this epistle. It also highlights Ibn Masarra's pioneering position in the history of what we refer to as Andalusī mystical philosophy.

Ibn Masarra's intellectual milieu

In this introduction, as well as in our detailed commentary to the *Epistle on contemplation*, we have ruled out an unequivocal identification of Ibn Masarra with either Mu'tazilī *kalām* or with Ṣūfism. Elements which are often identified with these systems undoubtedly feed into his thought, but what is discerned most prominently is the great influence upon him of the particular neoplatonic trends known mostly by means of such sources as the Longer Version of the pseudo-Aristotle preserved in Judaeo-Arabic.⁴⁵ These sources must have circulated in al-Andalus and North Africa and their teachings can be found in both Andalusī and Maghribī Jewish and Muslim texts.⁴⁶

In Ibn Masarra's intellectual profile, one sees also the unmistakable traits of Ismā'īlī-Shī'ī teachings. These traits strongly suggest his association with an intellectual-mystical milieu close to that which, later on, produced the *Epistles of the pure brethren*. In his *Book of letters*, these traits are even more apparent than in the Epistle discussed here, in particular as regards letter mysticism. Indeed, letter mysticism seems to be one of the hallmarks of this intellectual-mystical milieu, whose rich speculations were fed by late antique teachings. These teachings, which show a strong neoplatonic-hermetic bend, circulated in such writings as the corpus ascribed to Jābir b. Ḥayyān, early Ismā'īlī writings and in Jewish commentaries to *Sefer Yetzira*. Such commentaries proliferated during this period in Hebrew as well as in Arabic. It is noteworthy that Ibn Masarra's sojourn in Qayrawān corresponds to the rise of the Fāṭimīs there and to the activities of their Jewish court physician, the neoplatonic philosopher Isaac Israeli, to whom such a commentary is also attributed. Ibn Masarra's *Book of letters*, as we hope to show in detail elsewhere, is a product of precisely this complex tradition.⁴⁷

Far from being simply an eclectic thinker, Ibn Masarra integrates these elements into something original and perhaps new. His writings present mystical-philosophical patterns that are different from those

⁴⁵See above, at note 30.

⁴⁶As examples of texts where this teaching can be discerned, one can mention the writings of Isaac Israeli, various commentaries on *Sefer Yetzira*, *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*, Ibn Gabirol's *Fons Vitae*, Moses ibn Ezra's *Maqālat al-ḥadīqa*, Ibn al-Sīd al-Baṭalyawsī, Ibn Ṭufayl, the so-called Ibn Ḥasdai's neoplatonist and others.

⁴⁷See, for example, P. Kraus, *Jābir ibn Ḥayyān: contribution à l'histoire des idées scientifiques dans l'Islam*; P.E. Walker and W. Madelung, *The advent of the Fatimids: a contemporary Shi'ī witness*; H. Halm, *The Fatimids and their traditions of learning*. On Ibn Masarra's possible exposure to Jewish letter speculations, see Stroumsa, "Ibn Masarra and the beginnings of mystical thought in al-Andalus," pp. 105–110.

which had crystallized in the East, in philosophy as well as in Ṣūfism. Such an original thinker cannot be understood without assessing the historical and intellectual context from which he sprang. This intellectual milieu is characterized by its multi-religious interaction. A common language (Arabic), the common philosophical and scientific curriculum and the shared libraries, facilitated a close association of Jewish and Muslim intellectuals. This Muslim-Jewish cultural exchange holds true regarding the Islamic world at large, but in the Andalusī-Maghribī context where, during this period, Christian intellectuals played a minor role compared to their co-religionists in the East, it is even more evident and significant.⁴⁸

This special cultural and religious climate typical of 10th-century al-Andalus shaped also subsequent generations of thinkers and mystics there. The original patterns which we first find in Ibn Masarra's works are discernible and further developed in later stages of Andalusī thought and mysticism. Indeed, Ibn Masarra stands at the very beginning of the development of Andalusī mystical philosophy, both Muslim and Jewish. Mystical philosophy in al-Andalus, as is well known, yielded extraordinary fruits: in Islam it produced the remarkable and influential work of Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240); in Judaism it culminated in the flourishing of the Kabbalah (12th–13th centuries onwards). It is impossible to understand the nature and development of these two traditions without tracing their trails back to Ibn Masarra.

Translation and commentary: method of presentation

The translation offered here follows the text of *Risālat al-iʿtibār* based on our examination of the text in MS Chester Beatty 3168. We also consulted Jaʿfar's editions (1978 and 1982) as well as those by Kenny (2002) and by Garrido Clemente (2007). The translation is followed by a detailed commentary. In the commentary we have added hermeneutic, comparative and contextual notes regarding specific points raised by the text. To facilitate the reading, we have divided the text, in both

⁴⁸ On the significance of the Jewish-Muslim intellectual exchange in al-Andalus, see, for instance, D. Urvoy, *Pensers d'al Andalus. La vie intellectuelle à Cordoue et Seville au temps des empires berbères*, pp. 29, 33; *idem*, "Sur les débuts de la pensée spéculative en Andalus," pp. 707–717; B.F. Reilly, *The contest of Christian and Muslim Spain*, pp. 17–18; Stroumsa, "Thinkers of 'This Peninsula': an integrative approach to the study of philosophy in al-Andalus." On the Andalusī "socio-political networks," and "interconfessional context," integrating Muslims and Jews, see J. Vahid Brown, "Andalusī mysticism: a recontextualization," pp. 81, 88 *et passim*.

the translation and commentary, into paragraphs. For the readers' convenience, we have also marked in the translation the pages of Ja'far's 1978 edition as well as the folios of the manuscript. Qur'ānic verses are translated by us and are quoted in italics. Sources are cited in full in the bibliography and referred to by a short title. References in the commentary to Ibn Masarra's *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf* (Book of letters) are also based on our examination of the manuscript and referenced to Ja'far's 1978 edition.

Sigla

Q	Qur'ān (<i>sūra</i> : verse)
[]	Paragraphs (added by us for convenient reference)
[]	completing a verse (in the text); words added for clarity in the translation.
< >	a conjectural reconstructions of the text
{ }	folios of the MS
()	pages of Ja'far's 1978 edition

*Epistle on contemplation*⁴⁹

{175} In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. God's blessing upon our Master, His Prophet Muḥammad.

The Epistle on contemplation, by the jurist Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Jabālī, may God be pleased with him and may He grant him pleasure.

[1] Peace and God's mercy be with you. To you I praise God; there is no God but Him. I bless His Prophet, and I ask Him to make me act rightly in all matters.

You have mentioned, may God's mercy be with you, what you have read in a certain book: that he who seeks indication by contemplation finds nothing by contemplating the world from below upwards other than what had been indicated by the prophets from above downwards. I have therefore resolved to validate this and illustrate it.

[2] Know, may God grant you and us good fortune, that, to begin with, God, great and glorious, gave His servants intellects, which are light of His light, so that by them they may behold His order and come to

⁴⁹The present translation corresponds to ff. 175–190 of the manuscript and to pp. 348–360 of Ja'far's 1978 edition; the numbers in { } and in () correspond to folios and pages of the Arabic text respectively.

know His decree. Thus they gave testimony regarding God by what He testified regarding Himself, and so did also His angels and those among His created beings who possess knowledge.

[3] Then God, great and glorious, made all that He created, heaven and earth, to be signs indicating Him, expressing His Lordship and His beautiful attributes. The world in its entirety is therefore a book, whose letters are His speech. Those who seek to behold read them by the light of true thinking, according to their perception and the scope of their contemplation, while the eyes of their hearts are turned around the manifest and hidden marvels {176}. These are revealed to those who see, but veiled from him who is distracted *and turns away from remembering Us, desiring only the present life* (Q 53:29). This is the sum of his knowledge, the sphere of his thought and the limit of his intent, for his vision does not exceed that which he observes with his eyes.

[4] God, great and glorious, said: *Have they not observed the kingdom of heaven and earth and every thing that God created?* (Q 7:185). Hence it becomes clear to you that every thing that God created is subject for thought and a call for indication (*maṭlab li-'l-dalāla*). He also said, praising His friends who seek to behold: *And they ponder the creation of heavens and earth [saying]: Our Lord, You did not create this in vain* (Q 3:191).

[5] Indeed, by God, thinking gave them insight, so that heaven and earth testified to them as to that which prophecy had declared; namely, that He did not create this ordered, masterly established and well balanced world in vain; rather, He created it for recompense. Therefore, while confirming this, they ask refuge from hell-fire, saying: *Praise be to You, protect us from the punishment of hell-fire* (end of Q 3:91). In His book He, great and glorious, awakened, spelled out, reiterated, and urged people to think, to remember and to behold. In it He brought together and separated, made manifest and repeated, in accordance with the position of all this for the benefit that this entails for His servants and for His revival of their hearts.

[6] He sent the prophets, God's prayers and blessings upon them, to proclaim to people and to clarify for them the esoteric things, and to attest to these things by manifest signs. This is in order that they may attain certitude {177}, for which they will be recompensed and brought to account, and on which they will be questioned. He said: *He governs the order and separates the signs, so that you may be certain of meeting your Lord* (Q 13:2). And He said: *Then, when they arrived, He said: 'Have you denied My signs without encompassing their knowledge? What were you doing?!'* (Q 27:84).

[7] The prophets, then, proclaimed the divine order. They began their

description listing [them] according to rank and order.⁵⁰ They indicated God, Glorious be His countenance, and His beautiful attributes; how He began His creation and brought it forth, then sat upon His throne; [they indicated] the footstool of His kingship, His heavens and earth, and so on to the last thing in it.

[8] He commanded that we contemplate this, and indicated that we should begin by contemplating the signs of the earth, saying: *O people, Worship your Lord who created you and those who preceded you, so that you may fear Him, Who spread down the earth for you, and built above you the sky, and made water descend from the sky; by this water he brought forth crops to provide for you* (Q 2:21–22). And He said: *O people, fear your Lord, who created you from one soul* (Q 4:1). And He said: *God splits the seed and the date-stone, He brings out the living out of the dead, and the dead out of the living* (Q 6:95). And He said: *There are signs in the earth for those who have certitude, as well as in your selves; do you not see?* (Q 51:20–21).

[9] The world then, with all its creatures and signs, is a ladder by which those who contemplate ascend to the great signs of God on high. He who climbs, must climb from the lower to the higher. They climb by means of the intellects, who ascend from their lowly station to the point where they reach the highest signs described by the prophets.

[10] When they ponder, they behold; when they behold, they find truth to be one with the accounts of the prophets, peace be with them, and in accordance with their descriptions of divine truth;⁵¹ the one agrees with the other and verifies it, there is no contradiction in it as regards that which the prophets proclaimed, it is one and the same. They find that contemplation bears testimony to the prophetic message and verifies it; they find the prophetic message in agreement with contemplation (351), with no contradiction between them. The proof is thus [doubly] supported, certitude is revealed, and the hearts attain the realities of faith.

[11] In this way, which the Book indicates and to which the messengers guided, the light that is never extinguished is acquired and truthful insights are gained. By these insights, those who approach their Lord come close to Him, and, unlike others, attain the praiseworthy station in this world and in the Hereafter. They behold the hidden with the eyes of their hearts; they come to know the science of the Book, whilst their hearts bear witness that it is the truth.

[12] God, the exalted, said: *He who knows that what was revealed to you by your Lord is the truth, is he the same as one who is blind? Only the*

⁵⁰Lit.: “The greatest as greatest, the first as first.”

⁵¹Or: “...in accordance with the truth they described, [revealed] by God.”

possessors of discerning hearts remember, those who keep God's pledge and do not violate the covenant, to His words: *and they dread the terrible reckoning* (Q 13:19–21) {179}. Then He concluded the chapter, tying up everything spoken in it, saying: *And those who disbelieve say: 'You are not sent as a messenger.'* Say: *'God and those who have the science of the book suffice as witness between you and me'* (Q 13:43). No mortal can attain knowledge of the science of the Book unless he brings together what is recounted with contemplation, and verifies that which he hears by that which he beholds. May God include us and you among those who have certitude, those who seek to behold.

[13] The process of seeking indications from the lower world upwards can be illustrated in many ways and from various aspects. They all lead to one source. For example, the observer may examine one of the three [genera]: animals, plants and inanimate beings. He observes the plant and sees an inanimate, lifeless piece of wood. He then observes the motion of nutrition in it, as it is thrust from below upwards, and is separated into various parts, such as wood, bark, leaves, blossom, fruit and stone, which feed on it and on nothing else.

[14] As he observes this nutrition, he sees that it ascends upwards and spreads sideways. He then says: "The nature of water, however, is to move downwards!" (352) This ascending motion, therefore, cannot stem from a natural disposition. As we do not find anything that moves naturally upwards except fire, there must be something else, an opposite disposition, which causes the water to deviate from its natural course. He thus concludes that the water has [something like] fire, that moves it up, contrary to the [natural] motion of water.

[15] He then observes how this nutrition is distributed {180} and how it adjusts itself as it gushes forth and settles down. He realizes that neither water nor fire have in their nature [the capacity] to subdivide and become specified. He observes this nutrition; it is one and the same water, in one and the same earth and in one and the same air, yet it is subdivided into these various kinds: rigid wood, supple branches, dark green leaves, soft fruits, delicate kernel and skin. Plants and kernels of various colors, textures, tastes and smells are *irrigated by one and the same water yet some of them We make more excellent than others to eat*. (Q 13:4).

[16] He knows therefore that water and fire — in addition to which there are only air and earth — none of these four have anything in their nature that enables them to specify or to reverse their nature in order to bring about these marvels and diverse performances.

[17] He observes water, fire, earth and air and finds them to be opposites which do not come together by their own accord. There must therefore

be one who brings these opposites together, who takes them out of their natural disparity and combines them against their essence. There must be one who distributes the nutrition within their natures; there must be one who specifies this nutrition and transforms it into those diverse kinds, each in its season.

[18] Given that one restricted nature brings into life but one species, one movement and one kind, it transpires that he who brings these incompatible opposites together, who moves nutrition in different directions and who transforms it into diverse kinds {181} is one who, unlike those bound by nature, is under no constraint and has no restricted disposition. The restricted nature must have, apart from itself, someone who restricts it, whereas in itself, it indicates to its own dependence and subjugation.

[19] (353) He observes water and [sees that] it does not fit this description; he observes earth and it, too, does not fit it; he observes fire and it, too, does not fit it, and neither does air. Observation thus compels him to raise his thought beyond these things, in his search for the one who, by the testimony of his innate knowledge, made necessary something else, and to ascend, with his heart's vision, to what is beyond them. This is so since the one who brings them together despite their differences and makes them perform contrary to their nature has to be above them, encompassing them, higher and greater than them.

[20] At first, his inquisitive mental intent ascends to the first firmament, and he says: "Perhaps this is the farthest limit of these four natures." But then, above the first firmament there is another, and yet another firmament above that. Their existence is indicated by the subjugated celestial spheres, up to seven spheres, visible to sight, containing the sun, the moon, and the stars. Contemplating them, he finds that they are individuals with different shapes and aspects, and of different kinds. They have parts, limits, and motions, which are harnessed and subjugated; they have no power to operate, and they do not transgress their course. This resembles the plants of the earth with which contemplation began: As regards constraint and subjugation, they are tied to composition, just like what lies below them. Thus, the testimony of innate knowledge requires that he who governs them should be above them and encompass them.

[21] When he roams in the lower world, searching for an indication to what is above it, he finds there a fifth entity, nobler and higher than these four; it is the animate spirit, which has power to operate and possesses hearing and vision, movement and understanding. So he says: I see that all things follow this noble spiritual soul, and I see that, in understanding and the power to operate, everything is beneath it. Above the seventh

firmament, this soul encompasses the body of the world. It holds the seventh firmament in its movement just as it holds and transports the animate body, encompassing the external and internal of it. He then says: This is an encompassing sphere, the sphere of the soul, the world of the soul.

[22] He then finds the place of the footstool (*makān al-kursī*) and the place of the spirit to be permanent and encompassing, and perceived, by innate knowledge, to be above the seventh firmament. For it is impossible for these seven firmaments, with their weight and the size of their bodies, to hold themselves (354). Whatever holds them must be more encompassing, broader and higher than them. According to the testimony of the hearts, it is inconceivable that this formidable soul and the great encompassing spirit should be below {183} the earthly, inanimate things.

[23] God, Noble and Exalted, said: *Then turn your vision once more and the vision will come back to you, shamed and lost.* (Q 67:4). The observer turns his vision once more, but now he sees that this spiritual soul, which is nobler than the four natural forces, is determined by the same things that tie the composed natures distributed among animate things. It is disjoint, restricted to boundaries which it cannot transgress, and enclosed within a limit which it cannot cross. It is harnessed by the reins of subjugation, bondage and lowliness, branded by marks of impotence. It was accorded a certain power which it cannot exceed, and is powerless regarding what lies beyond it.

[24] He now sees that infirmities seize it in ways which it does not comprehend and cannot avoid; for it sleeps and is oblivious, suffers and is sickened, rejoices and grieves. It also grows from childhood to maturity, and passes from youth to old age. It is seized by decrease and increase, deficiency and plenty and other marks that indicate subjugation and bondage.

[25] Since all this is incumbent upon the soul that is separated from the great soul, it must also apply to the great soul, for whatever applies to the part applies also to its foundation; they necessarily abide by the same rule. The great soul is thus determined by the same subjugation, lowliness and impotence that determine that which is below it. By virtue of encompassing and holding that which is definite, it too is determined by limitation and finitude.

[26] He finds that this soul, despite {184} its ability to operate, and despite its superiority over that which cannot operate as it does, is held by reins which never slacken. Limits were set to its power to operate, and when it reaches these limits, it admits its impotence “and goes back weary,” (*wa-raja‘at ḥāsira*) admitting (*muqirra*). [He sees that] ideas

and vicissitudes which beset it come from what is other than itself, and he finds [that] the marks of subjugation and dependency are evident in it. He then knows that above it there is something other than itself, and he wishes [to find] in the lower world a trace of this other to serve as indication.

[27] He finds that the essence of this soul (355) is motion and submission to the intellect, for she is subservient. She is found to sustain motion and life without possessing an intellect. Hence, while sustaining motion and life, she is deprived of choice and of [true] power to operate.

[28] He then knows that the soul and the intellect are two things; that motion and life belong to her essence and that the intellect is constituted within her from above; that it rules her, operates her and prevails over her motion, that it allots her will to her and conducts her to his choice rather than hers. It must therefore be higher, greater and nobler than her.

[29] By innate perception it becomes evident, therefore, that there exists a power which encompasses the great soul and corresponds to her. It is higher and nobler than her by dint of its superior governance and its just conduct over her and over the world which she carries. From this power understanding, knowledge, insights and the whole proof spring forth. They say: "This is the sphere of the intellect, the world of the intellect." They find [there] the place of the throne {185} and the site of the supreme decrees and the great volition — praise be to God, *the Lord of the supreme throne*. (Q 9:129, 23:86, 27:26).

[30] Then the investigator observes focusing his observation. He finds that the intellect corresponds to this animal soul. Along with her it, too, is restricted, for her boundaries and reins take hold of it. Withal its nobleness and eminence it, too, is stopped at a limit and is incapable of reaching what lies beyond it. It manifestly grows with the soul, increases and decreases, becomes clear and tarnished.

[31] Blemishes take hold of it, notions which occur not from its essence, whence it does not know. And, manifestly, the marks of helplessness, humiliation and subjugation all subside within it, evident in it. There is, then, above it a governor who has placed upon it measure, limit and boundary; who has released upon it good and evil, occurring notions and fleeting ideas, whence it does not know. It becomes, therefore, necessarily evident that there exists above it one who dominates it and all that lies beneath it, since all that lies beneath it is under it.

[32] He observes this supreme sovereign: is he restricted in the same way that all that lies beneath him? Is he known by limits and corresponds to the intellect in the same way that the intellect corresponds to the soul and the soul to the body? Not so; they have found him by His traces and

signs, which descend on the intellect and on that which lies beneath it; descend in such a way that nothing is free from them (356). They have not found him [to be] in direct contact with anything. For, according to innate perception, there is nothing above the intellect with which it is in direct contact or to which it corresponds.

[33] And since the lofty and great one transcends {186} direct contact with the limited, it also transcends resemblance to the limited and similitude with it. Therefore it is necessary that his encompassing should be above all encompassing, and his loftiness above all loftiness. He thus goes beyond the boundaries of imaginings (*awhām*), for the imaginings are the intellects (*‘uqūl*), which resemble things that take the image of the models (*al-mumaththila li-‘l-ashyā’ al-mutamaththila li-‘l-amthila*). The intellects are limited; the limited cannot contain or encompass whatever is above it, what <does not> correspond to it, what is loftier than it, or what contains it. Sayings may change, but the truth does not change.

[34] This implies necessarily that the lofty one has no similitude; He has no end; He has no beginning; He has no parts; and He has no limit, nor does [any of it] enter into His oneness and greatness. The supreme king transcends the entire species and is above it, except by means of the proofs which give indication of Him and the traces which He imprinted in His creation, bearing witness to His lordship.

[35] It is thus established, according to the innate intellect, that existence is contingent upon him, with neither similitude nor species. Observation based on investigation testifies that nothing in the world is self-subsistent but rather it is all contingent upon another. It becomes evident that if this other were like the contingent things, it too would be contingent.

[36] From every investigation and from every aspect it becomes obligatory, in a binding way from which no intelligent person can escape, that everything inevitably requires one who is lord, king, first, originator of this world {187}, *nothing is like His likeness* (Q 42:11). Nothing of what He has created resembles Him. He is distinct in essence and attribute from all that He has created, yet He is with all things in seasons, knowledge and manifestation; He has made all things needy of Him.

[37] For all traces of operation and composition are connected to each other and contingent upon one another: the lower upon that which is above it, rank by rank, ending with the uppermost, which is ultimate truth. Thus, you will find that its division, change and composition are the effect of another, not of its own essence. You will then find that it has a [dependence?] upon what is above it, similar to the neediness towards it that you found in things below it.

[38] Thereupon you will find your Lord and Creator (357); you will

meet Him in your self and you will see Him with your inner vision. By ascending the path which He has opened for you towards Him, you will behold His innermost court. He will show you His entire kingdom: bound by His harness, restricted by His encompassing, aligned in ranks according to His decrees, operated upon by His governance, standing upon His purposes, constrained by His will and volition. There is no ruler in it but Him; nothing is allowed to pass in it without His permission. Praise be to Him, the One, the Creator, the Encompassing, who presides over all that He created, *who holds the heavens and earth lest they perish* (Q 35:41), who acts according to what He wills — may He be much exalted.

[39] This is an illustration of seeking indication by contemplation (*istidlāl al-iʿtibār*). Around this circled those who speak pretentiously {188}, called philosophers. This is what they sought with no firm intention, so they missed it. They deviated from it and were lost in wildernesses with no light. They saw its foundation in something which they had heard, or something whose imprint they had found, inspired by the prophecy of Abraham, peace be upon him, contemplating the kingdom's created things in search of indication for his creator. They aspired for this path without [firm] intention and so they missed it.

[40] Then the prophets, God's blessings be with them, came forth and said: Your Lord is God *who created you and those before you* (Q 2:21); [He is] one, true, He has no partner, *nothing is like His likeness* (Q 42:11). He is greater than all things and He is the one who encompasses everything. The regions of the earth do not contain nor encompass Him. *Eyes do not perceive Him* (Q 6:103), for He has neither end nor beginning. He is (358) the first, prior to everything that has limit and end. Everything but Him is created, restricted and hence disjoint.

[41] The first to be created were the throne and the water, and within the throne He inscribed all His decrees and rulings and that upon which His will is borne. There is no will in the world but His, nothing comes to pass without His permission. His throne encompasses all things; lofty it rises above them and holds them in rein. Beneath it is His footstool which *encompasses the heavens and earth* (Q 2:255), preserving and sustaining them without toil or direct contact.

[42] He sat and rose above the throne. And, notwithstanding His loftiness and holiness, He is closer to {189} everything than its own self. He created these seven heavens below His throne in six days, and installed in them a lamp and a shining moon, and stars sailing in their orbs, dominated, determined by His decree, no one precedes the other. *He created all species: that which the earth brings forth, that which is issued from their own selves and that which comes from whence they do not*

know (Q 36:36).

[43] Everything that He created in His heavens and His earth He made as signs indicating Him, witnesses of His lordship, greatness, wisdom, justice, mercy and of His beautiful names. He who thinks and contemplates while turning towards his Lord, wishing to get closer to Him, will see this in himself and, with him, also in everything in the world. For everything is needy of Him, constrained by that which He holds with Him. He is the one who sustains and maintains it; if it were not for Him, everything would perish, cease to exist and die out.

[44] Then, from the rest of His beautiful attributes and beautiful (359) names, they recounted, pursued, divided and distinguished that which is connected to contemplation as has been done above. The signs testify to it all and tell it, each one of them testifying to the other and indicating it: the first indicating the last and the last indicating the first; the external supporting the inner and the inner the external. The more the contemplator observes, the more he sees, and the more he sees, the stronger he becomes in conviction, divine aid, certitude and beholding.

[45] The prophetic message, then, being initiated from the direction of the throne, descends towards the earth; it concurs {190} with contemplation that ascends upward to the throne from the direction of the earth — the two equal one another, there is no difference between them. No clear message comes from God without there being in the world a sign that indicates it, and there is no sign in the world which indicates a divine message without there being a prophecy that had proclaimed it and had alerted to it, in either a detailed or a comprehensive way.

[46] When the two proofs concur, when the prophetic message and the described intelligible evidence confirm one another, then the intellect is compelled by necessity — a necessity that restricts it, encompasses it, and rises above it — to acknowledge this. Should it counteract and aspire to leave its confinement, it will leave the haven entirely and will have no refuge but the great fire, for it has withdrawn from God's protection.

[47] But if [the intellect] holds on to it by the cords [of this necessity] and safeguards itself by it, it comes close to God the helper in whose protection, from eternity, provision has been sought. Then, when He reveals Himself to those who approach, they enter God's sanctuary where He shelters His friends who, desiring His knowledge, look to be sheltered by Him. Their lofty intents that rise toward their Lord's sanctuary carry them upwards. These intents put their trust in the hope which was pledged to them in *the promise of truth that they were given* (Q 16:46), (360) but woe to those who do not heed, *whose eyes are covered from my remembrance* (Q 18:101). *This is God's favor which He bestows on whoever He wills; God is the possessor of the great favor* (Q 57:21).

Commentary to the *Epistle on contemplation* (*Risālat al-iʿtibār*)

1 “He who seeks indication by contemplation” (المستدل بالاعتبار): the object of “indication” (*istidlāl*) is God, although in the text this is only implicit. For the notions of *istidlāl* and *iʿtibār* and for the contemplative direction from below upwards, see Introduction; see also below, commentary to paragraphs 11, 39.

2 “He testified regarding Himself ... (بما شهد به لنفسه...)”: compare Qurʾān 3:18: “شهد الله أنه لا اله إلا هو والملائكة وأولوا العلم قائماً بالقسط لا اله إلا هو العزيز الحكيم.”

3 “Signs indicating Him” (آيات دالات): the grammatically irregular usage of adjectives in the plural after non-human nouns appears in Qurʾān 3:7 (*āyāt muḥkamāt/mutashābihāt*). It is later attested also after *kalimāt* (*logoi*) and *ṣifāt* (attributes), nouns typically associated with God; see, for example, D.J. Lasker and S. Stroumsa, *The polemic of Nestor the Priest*, vol. 1, p. 28, paragraph 4 of the Judaeo-Arabic text: *al-kalimāt al-makḥṣūṣāt*; and see the annotated translation in *ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 53, 137–138. See also Abū Ṭalib al-Makki, *Qūt al-qulūb*, vol. 1, chapter 23 (*fī muḥāsabat al-naḥs*), p. 77: كلمات جامعات موجزات; *ibid.*, vol. 1, chapter 28, p. 101 (*al-maqām al-thānī min al-murāqaba*): خمس آيات; *ibid.*, vol. 2, chapter 32 (*dhikr makhāwif al-muḥibbīn*), p. 72: محكمات; *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 87 (*dhikr faḍāʾil shahādat al-tawḥīd wa-waṣf tawḥīd al-muqinīn*): وكانت صفاته كلها أحاداً كاملاً تامات; also *al-Risāla al-jāmiʿa*, p. 54: الآيات المحكمات في الآفاق والانس. “Signs” (*āyāt*) belong, therefore, to that same category where the irregular plural form implies personification.

“Lord,” “Lordship” (ربوبية, رب): these terms indicate the inherent connection between the various levels of creation and their “lord.” This connection is essential for the process of contemplation and its attainments. In this sense *rubūbiyya* is at the core of the epistle (see also commentary to paragraphs 34, 43 below). Indeed, these terms are used more frequently here than in Ibn Masarra’s *Book of letters*, but note the term علم الربوبية in *Book of letters*, Jaʿfar, p. 312. Note also the frequency of Qurʾānic prooftexts for these terms.

“His beautiful attributes” (صفاته الحسنى): Ibn Masarra employs this rather unusual combination interchangeably with the canonical “the beautiful names” (الأسماء الحسنى; see also paragraphs 7, 43, 44). The identification of “names” and “attributes” as well as their association with the process of contemplation is explicitly formulated and further elaborated in *Book of letters*, Jaʿfar, p. 311.

“The eyes of their hearts are turned around” (أَبْصَارُ قُلُوبِهِمْ تُقَلَّبُ): this phrase alludes to Qur’ān 24:37: “يَخَافُونَ يَوْمًا تَتَقَلَّبُ فِيهِ الْقُلُوبُ وَالْأَبْصَارُ.” According to a prophetic tradition found in early sources, the Prophet used to invoke God by the formula “يَا مُقَلِّبَ الْقُلُوبِ” — see, e.g., *Musnad* Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), vol. 2, p. 173; *Muṣannaf* Ibn Abī Shayba (d. 235/849), 1409, vol. 6, p. 25, no. 29196. In most sources, this tradition is accompanied by the following elaboration: قلب ابن آدم على إصبعين من أصابع الله (أو الرحمن أو الجبار) إذا شاء أن يقلبه... قلبه; see also al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *Nawādir al-uṣūl*, p. 262, l. 6 (*al-aṣl al-ḥādī wa-’l-’ishrūn wa-’l-mi’atān*): والقلب يقلبه الله تعالى ولم يكله إلى... أحد; also *op. cit.*, p. 390, ll. 4–5 (*al-aṣl al-thāmin wa-’l-sittūn wa-’l-mi’atān*); al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, vol. 1, chapter 35 (*dhikr bayān ākhar min taḥṣīl al-ma’ānī*), p. 124; Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Beirut, 1994), vol. 1, pp. 279–280 (chapter 3). Ibn Masarra may have in mind this well-known ḥadīth which establishes the etymological link between *qalb* (heart) and *taqallub* (change, fluctuation, transformation).

“Those who seek to behold, read them by the light of true thinking, according to their perception and the scope of their contemplation”

يقروهم المستبصرون بعيان الفكرة الصادقة على حسب أبصارهم وسعة اعتبارهم. Of comparative relevance is the 49th *risāla* of the *Rasā’il ikhwān al-ṣafā’* (4:198–249); in particular such phrases as وفعله الذي فعله بذاته وأوجده بكلماته موجودة في موجوداته مسطورة في أرضه وسمواته وهي آياته المكتوبة في الأفاق والآنفس يتأمل الناظر فيها الواقف عليها الحق المبين — *ibid.*, p. 210. “*Basīra*,” “*istibṣār*,” is central for the Brethren of Purity; see, for example, *Rasā’il ikhwān al-ṣafā’*, vol. 3:336 فصل في بيان مشاهدة العلماء الحكماء العارفين المستبصرين الذين هم (أولياء الله المصطفون الذين يرون صانع العالم بعين البصيرة): وأما أولياء الله وأصفياءه والعلماء العارفون المستبصرون فإنهم يرونه ويشاهدونه في جميع أحوالهم ومتصرفاتهم... لا يغيب عنهم طريقة عين... ولما تحقق أولياء الله تعالى فهم هذه الآيات وعرفوها حق معرفتها شرح الله قلوبهم ونور أبصارهم... حتى رأوه وشاهدوه بأبصارهم كما عرفوه بقلوبهم... See also Introduction, note 7.

“The world in its entirety is therefore a book, whose letters are His speech” — كتاب حروفه كلامه; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Beirut, 1994), vol. 1, p. 291 (*al-bāb al-khāmis fī ma’rifat bismi Allāh al-rahīmān al-rahīm*): العالم الذي هو عندنا المصحف الكبير... فالعالم حروفه مخطوطة مرقومة في رق الوجود المنشور ولا تزال الكتابة فيه دائمة أبدا... For a reference by Ibn Barraḡān (d. 536/1141) to this statement of Ibn Masarra, see D. Gril, “L’interprétation par transposition symbolique (*i’tibār*), selon Ibn Barraḡān et Ibn ‘Arabī,” p. 153.

4 You did not create this in vain (Qur’ān 3:191): for a similar use of this verse, see *Rasā’il ikhwān al-ṣafā’*, vol. 1, p. 159; also vol. 2, p. 189 *et*

passim; see also Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, vol. 1, p. 14 (*al-faṣl al-sādis*).

5 “Recompense” (جزاء) and its eschatological implications are central themes in this treatise (see also below, commentary to paragraphs 12, 46–47). Related to this are also terms derived from *th-w-b* (paragraph 6) and *h-s-b* (paragraph 12); for a similar connection of the observation of God’s signs and eschatology, see al-Muḥāsibī, *al-Makāsib*, pp. 118–120.

“The benefit for His servants” (منافع العباد): this brings to mind the Mu‘tazilī concept of “*al-aṣlah*”; see, for instance, W. Montgomery-Watt, “*al-Aṣlah*,” *ET*², s.v. Note Ibn Masarra’s positive view of the world of creation — it is good, organized, and harmonious and is made with people’s benefit in mind. For parallel material, see, for instance, *Rasā’il ikhwān al-ṣafā’*, vol. 3, p. 452: ... قوله باري حكيم ... القول بحدوث العالم ... وأنه قد أحكم أمر عالمه وأتقن أمر خلقه على أحسن النظام والترتيب ... also *ibid.* 3, pp. 482f.; also *ibid.*, pp. 491–492.

At the same period as Ibn Masarra, Shmuel Ha-Nagid (993–1056), a Jewish Granadan poet known in the Arabic sources as Ibn al-Naghrīla, also describes the world as a “wise creation” (*yetsira meḥukkama*); see H. Shirman, *Hebrew poetry in Spain and Provence*, vol. 1, p. 136. It is noteworthy that the Jewish poet uses a Hebrew verbal form, *meḥukkama*, which bears clear sonoric association with the Arabic *al-‘ālam al-muḥkam*. Thus, it is possible to establish that the Nagid’s recall of this biblical “wisdom” motif is combined with associations to the current Arabic culture, with which Ibn Naghrīla had been closely familiar. Another pertinent example for the prevalence of this motif among Jewish writers is the second chapter of Baḥyā b. Paqūda’s *The duties of the hearts*, written in Judaeo-Arabic. The chapter is titled شرح وجوه الاعتبار بالخلوقين. There we find, for example, the following similar usages: قد وضع كل شيء فيها أحسن وضع وأتقن إحكام تلقاء منافعهم وقصد وان الخالق تعالى (al-Hidāya ilā farā’id al-qulūb, pp. 95–96); ركب العالم تركيبا محكما ورتبه ترتيبا مبرما وفصله تفصيلا بينا وجعله مشيرا إليه ودليلا عليه (ibid., p. 100). See also commentary to paragraph 3 above and commentary to paragraphs 8, 10, 46 below. For a description similar to Ibn Masarra’s as regards the end result of mental observation, see al-Muḥāsibī’s *Kitāb al-‘aql*, p. 179. For al-Muḥāsibī’s teaching concerning the intellect (‘aql), neither Mu‘tazilī nor strictly speaking Ṣūfī, see J. van Ess, *Die Gedankenwelt des Ḥārīt al-Muḥāsibī*, pp. 76ff.

6 *He separates the signs* (يفصل الآيات; Qur’ān 13:2): here in the sense of God’s act of specifying the signs of creation; cf. *Book of letters*, Ja‘far, p. 332. Note the nexus of the verbs *dabbara*, *aḥkama*, *faṣṣala* in *Book of letters*, Ja‘far, p. 321. For the attribute *al-mukhaṣṣis*, which probably corresponds to *al-mufaṣṣil*, see also below commentary to paragraph 17.

7 “According to rank and order” (الأعظم فالأعظم والأول فالأول): this is a common idiomatic structure designating the proper hierarchical order of things: “first things first,” i.e. “the messengers began with the most important things, and moved on to the less important things, and so forth.” Cf. *Rasā'il ikhwān al-ṣafā'*, vol. 3, p. 183: وعلى هذا المثال يكون قبول الهيولى للصور المختلفة، الأول فالأول على الترتيب...؛ وإن البارئ تعالى علة كل موجود ومبدعه ومتقنه ومتممه ومكمله على النظام والترتيب الأشرف...؛ see also *al-Risāla al-jāmi'a*, vol. 5, p. 13 (*fī na'at Allāh khalq al-ṣūra al-ḥusnā al-ḥaqīqīya*): إلا من شهد بالحق وهم يعلمون، يعني الملائكة الذين هم عالم العقل وعالم النفس شهادة عامة من كلا الفريقين؛ الأول فالأول والأفضل فالأفضل، وكملت الوجدانية لله عز وجل بمحض العبودية... وخالص الألوهية... Note that these linguistic constructs are part of a neoplatonic representation, in which the hierarchical order of creation and, in general, the hierarchical order in the nature of things is central. For the syntactical construct, see al-Sibawayhi, *al-Kitāb*, vol. 1, p. 168 (chapter 96).

He sat upon His throne (استوى على عرشه): for this Qur'ānic expression, see, e.g., Qur'an 7:54, 10:3. On Ibn Masarra's understanding of the pair “throne” (*‘arsh*) and “footstool” (*kursī*), see below, commentary to paragraphs 41, 42; see also *Book of letters*, Ja'far, p. 333.

8 Ibn Masarra proposes here the first stage in a detailed practice which will unfold in this treatise, to be enacted stage by stage in reversed order of creation. For *i'tibār* in *Book of letters*, see Ja'far, p. 311. The use of these verses as prooftexts for the call to contemplate creation is widespread in speculative and Ṣūfī sources; for instance, Aḥmad b. 'Aṣim al-Anṭākī in *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'*, vol. 9, pp. 305–306; al-Muḥāsibī in *ibid.*, vol. 10, p. 92; Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, vol. 1, p. 34 (*bayān ākhar min al-i'tibār li-ahl al-taḥsīn wa-l-tidhkār*); *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 204 (*Kitāb ḥukm al-musāfir*); al-Ghāzālī, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, vol. 4, pp. 376ff (*Kitāb al-tafakkur: al-kitāb al-tāsi' min rub' al-munjiyāt*). Conspicuous in its absence among Ibn Masarra's prooftexts is Qur'an 59:2: فاعتبروا يا أولي الأبصار, a favoured prooftext for the religious obligation to contemplate; see, for example, Ibn Rushd, *Faṣl al-maqāl wa-taqrīr mā bayna al-sharī'a wa-l-ḥikma min al-ittiṣāl*, p. 3; for Ibn al-'Arabī's understanding of the Qur'ānic imperative *i'tabirū* in Qur'an 59:2, see W. Chittick, *The Sufi path of knowledge*, p. 120.

Notwithstanding the widespread preoccupation with contemplation, Ibn Masarra stands out in his coherent teaching of contemplation that proceeds vertically in a sequential structure; compare, for instance, al-Muḥāsibī, *Kitāb al-'aql*, pp. 169–185. Al-Muḥāsibī's language is similar to Ibn Masarra's but his writing lacks any cosmological context. On Ibn Masarra's characteristic understanding of *i'tibār*, see further in the

Introduction. Compare also Ibn Ṭufayl's *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān* which is a literary model of a vertical ascent by contemplation. Ibn Ṭufayl, however, rarely uses *i'tibār* or its derivatives.

Those who have certitude (الموقنين; Qur'ān 51:20): this term brings to mind *Tawḥīd al-mūqinīn*, the title of a non-extant epistle attributed to Ibn Masarra, according to Ibn Ishāq Ibn al-Mar'a in his *Sharḥ al-irshād*; see L. Massignon, *Recueil de textes inédits*, p. 70. It is noteworthy that the uncommon expression *tawḥīd al-mūqinīn* is also used by Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī — see *Dhikr faḍā'il shahādat al-tawḥīd wa-waṣf tawḥīd al-mūqinīn*, vol. 2, p. 87. Ibn Taymiyya's use of this expression in *Kutub wa-rasā'il wa-fatāwā fī al-'aqida* (see vol. 5, p. 406) is expressly cited from *Qūt al-qulūb* in the context of Ibn Taymiyya's argument with Abū Ṭālib's position.

There are signs in the earth... as well as in your selves (Qur'ān 51:20–21), see also Qur'ān 41:53.

9 For the motif of “ascent,” cf. *Book of letters*, Ja'far, pp. 312 and 313. On the ladder imagery (درج), see, for instance, *al-Risāla al-jāmi'a*, vol. 5, p. 32 (*faṣl fī ma'rifat khiṣāl al-falsafa*): *وينتقل من أدون المنازل إلى أشرفها ومن أسفلها إلى أعلاها... فيرقى إلى درجات سلم المعارج فيخرج به مع الملائكة*. For a comparative analysis of this image, see the seminal paper by A. Altmann, “The ladder of ascension.” The material gathered by Altmann makes evident the neoplatonic (rather than Ṣūfī) provenance of this motif. It thus links Ibn Masarra's ascending, vertical contemplation with a long chain of mystical philosophers so typical also of Andalusī medieval spirituality. Note that the “signs” (*āyāt*) are a ladder for the ascension to the “great signs” (*āyāt Allāh al-kubrā*); on *kubrā*, see below commentary to paragraph 25.

10 Note that *al-ḥaqq* here designates truth, not one of God's names as in Ṣūfī vocabulary (for “ultimate truth,” *al-ḥaqq al-aqṣā*, see commentary to paragraph 37). By the same token, the expression *huwa huwa*, “it is one and the same,” indicates the identity of the truth achieved through contemplation with prophetic truth and does not refer to divine ontology. This idea is emphasized also in paragraph 33 (“the truth does not change”). In paragraph 45, the same idea is expressed by *sawā'an sawā'an*: “the two equal one another.” For this idiomatic construct, see al-Sībawayhi, *al-Kitāb*, vol. 1, p. 239.

Ibn Masarra speaks about the concordance of true philosophy and prophecy in *Book of letters*, Ja'far, p. 315, where he mentions “... the teaching of the philosophers and the ancients of the erring nations, people of the periods of interval [between prophets] who, without prophecy, attained the knowledge of God's unity.” He explicitly states that although their knowledge agrees with the prophetic message, “prophecy explained

it all in the plainest clarification and with the clearest proof." For a similar idea, see *Rasā'il ikhwān al-ṣafā'*, vol. 4, pp. 124–125 (*al-Risāla al-sābi'a wa-l-arba'ūn*); see also Ibn Ṭufayl, *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*, p. 145.

11 Note that, according to Ibn Masarra, the Qur'ān "indicates"; Ibn Masarra uses the root *dll* for both indications by reason/nature (as in *Epistle on contemplation*, paragraph 13 and paragraph 20, or in *Book of letters*, Ja'far, p. 311 and p. 321) and scripture (as in *Epistle on contemplation*, paragraph 7 and paragraph 11, or in *Book of letters*, Ja'far, pp. 332, 337 and 341). The proof by "indication" is a cornerstone of Mu'tazilī reasoning; see, for instance, J. van Ess, "The logical structure of Islamic theology," pp. 26–34; J.R.T.M. Peters, *God's created speech*, pp. 65–68.

"The light that is never extinguished": for this expression, see *Raṣā'il ikhwān al-ṣafā'*, vol. 4, pp. 179, 214: [الشمس] فيتلالا العالم ويزهر وهي [الشمس] فتدليل النور الذي لا يطفأ; this is said about the sphere of the sun which, in respect to the light which it emanates, is in an analogous position to the heart in the body.

"The praiseworthy station" (المقام المحمود) as in Qur'ān 17:79) is conventionally understood as the place of the Prophet from where he dispenses his intercession (*shafā'a*). It is also understood as the point of proximity to God's throne at which the righteous and holy ones (the *awliyā'*) are stationed.

Ibn Masarra's language here can be described as mystical, but not necessarily as Ṣūfī. It is much closer in concept and tone to what we find in the *Rasā'il ikhwān al-ṣafā'*; for example, vol. 3, p. 336.

12 *The science of the book* (Qur'ān 13:43): Ibn Masarra understands علم الكتاب in an eschatological context, which is connected to Qur'ān 13:19–21 and to the dreaded reckoning (*sū' al-ḥisāb*) mentioned in verse 21 (see also above commentary to paragraph 5). One should remember the end-of-days preoccupation of this period in al-Andalus, especially around the turn of the century (300/912). On the profound impact of these preoccupations, see, for instance, M. Fierro, "Por qué 'Abd al-Raḥmān III sucedió a su abuelo el emir 'Abd Allāh"; *eadem*, "Mahdisme et eschatologie dans al-Andalus"; *eadem*, "Le Mahdi Ibn Tūmart et al-Andalus: l'élaboration de la légitimité almohade", especially pp. 116–118; also, in the same volume, D. Cook, "Messianism and astronomical events during the first four centuries of Islam," especially, pp. 42–44; and M. García-Arenal, *Messianism and puritanical reform*, pp. 92–95.

For *ulū al-albāb* as describing those who reach supreme knowledge, see *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*, p. 144; for this idiom as describing the friends of God, those who are the elect ones (*awliyā' Allāh al-mukhlīṣūn... wa-ṣafwatuhu min khalqihī... alladhīna sammāhum al-bārī' ta'ālā ulū al-albāb wa-ulū*

al-abṣār), see *Rasā'il ikhwān al-ṣafā'*, vol. 1, p. 357.

13–15 “The motion of nutrition”: The movement of nature is from below upwards as well as sideways, but this contrasts with the downward movement of water.

“Separated into various parts”: subdivisions and specification are signs of divine manipulation as they are not produced by natural processes.

...*irrigated by one and the same water*: this theme appears also in Bahyā Ibn Paqūdā, *al-Hidāya ilā farā'id al-qulūb*, chapter 2, p. 97, ll. 15–6. It is also interesting that similar formulations of this idea can be traced back to Late Antique philosophy, see, for instance, Plotinus, *Enn.* III. 8.10.

13–19 “The observer... observes...”: *naẓar* is an important component of the praxis of *i'tibār*. It designates the in-depth observation and study of created phenomena one by one. *I'tibār* is the dynamic process that moves the contemplator from one stage of *naẓar* to another, drawing lessons before moving to the next stage. Note the dependence on Qur'ān 7:185 in paragraph 4; and compare, for example, Ibn Rushd, *Faṣl al-maqāl*, p. 2 (see above, commentary to paragraph 8).

14 We have not found parallels to Ibn Masarra's observation regarding the remarkable phenomenon of water rising up in the plant against its natural course. The Ikhwān use phenomena concerned with water in an overall different context; see, for example, *Rasā'il ikhwān al-ṣafā'*, vol. 4, p. 274.

15–16 “He realizes that neither water nor fire have in their nature [the capacity] to subdivide and become specified (*taqsīm wa-taḥṣīl*)”: Ibn Masarra observes here the four elements, earth, air, water and fire, each one of which has a single constant essence. The multiple, changing aspects of their effects are therefore astonishing and call for investigation. It is noteworthy that Ibn Masarra employs the notion of *taqsīm wa-taḥṣīl* in a process that starts from the simpler and lower elements of the created world. Such an upward moving process stands out in comparison to more common analyses of *taqsīm*, *taḥṣīl* and *takhṣīṣ* in *kalām* discussions of proofs for the existence of God, which tend to begin directly with God's power of subdividing and specifying (see also commentary to paragraphs 16–19). The prooftext upon which Ibn Masarra bases his observation (Qur'ān 13:4: *irrigated by one and the same water*) allows him to focus his attention on the element of water. The verse continues to say that despite the sameness of the water, God made some food (irrigated by it) more excellent than others: *wa-nufaḍḍilu...* It is tempting to speculate that Ibn Masarra may have read here *wa-nufaṣṣilu* (*We specify*) or, at least, that there is a playful associative connection suggested here by the graphic similarity of *نفضل* and *نفصل*. It is also possible that

Ibn Masarra is quoting from memory, as is apparent also in paragraph 26.

16–17 “There must therefore be one who brings these opposites together (*mu’allif bayna hādhihi al-aḍḍād*)” — for this idea, prevalent in *kalām* literature, see S. Stroumsa, “From the earliest known Judaeo-Arabic commentary on Genesis,” especially p. 394. It also appears among the arguments that serve *kalām* proofs for the existence of God; see H.A. Davidson, “John Philoponus as a source of medieval Islamic and Jewish proofs of creation,” p. 373.

18 “Dependence and subjugation (*al-faqr wa-’l-mamlaka*)”: *mamlaka* in the sense of the subjugation of one entity by a more powerful is frequent in Ibn Masarra’s writing; see, for example, in one of the following idioms: *al-a’lām al-dālla ‘alā al-mamlaka wa-’l-‘ubūdiyya* (paragraph 24); *āthār al-taskhīr wa-’l-mulk* (paragraph 26); *al-tadhīl wa-’l-mamlaka* (paragraph 31). Cf. also similar phrases, such as: *huwa [al-‘aql] yamlikuhā [al-nafs] wa-yuṣarrifuhā wa-yaghlibu ḥarakātihā* (paragraph 28); *fa-arāka malakūtaḥu kullahu mazmūman bi-zimāmihi* (paragraph 38). This usage of *mamlaka* seems unusual: it is not confirmed by the classical dictionaries or by Dozy’s *Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes*, and we did not find a parallel usage in philosophical or Ṣūfī sources. Moreover, in *Book of letters*, Ibn Masarra himself uses *mamlaka* in the more regular sense of kingship and majesty; see *Book of letters*, Ja’far, pp. 326, 329.

19 “The one who brings... together (*al-mu’allif*)”: see above commentary to paragraphs 16–17.

The notion of *fiṭra* appears in Qur’ān 30:30. For Ibn Masarra *fiṭra* means the inborn faculty to know and the innate perception of certain universal truths. Such understanding is common in philosophic and speculative literature; see J. van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra*, vol. 4, index, s.v. Other terms are also frequently used to describe the intellect as an inborn capacity which produces knowledge; for instance *gharīza*: see al-Muḥāsibī, *Kitāb al-‘aql*, p. 170; *Dāwūd Ibn Marwān al-Muqammiṣ’s Twenty chapters (‘Ishrūn maqāla)*, p. 81; Ibn Ṭufayl, see our Introduction; Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Beirut, 1994), vol. 3, pp. 122ff (*al-bāb al-thālith wa-’l-sab‘ūn, al-su’āl al-thānī wa-’l-arba‘ūn*). *Fiṭra* in the sense of inborn, instinctive capacity can be found occasionally in the *Rasā’il ikhwān al-ṣafā’*, but the more frequently used equivalent is *jibilla*. For the latter, see also Rowson, *A Muslim philosopher on the soul*, index, p. 363.

This understanding of *fiṭra* differs from the one found in canonical sources which identifies it with inborn Islam; see D.B. MacDonald, “Fiṭra,” *EI*², s.v.; also G. Gobillot, *La conception originelle: ses interprétations*

et fonctions chez les penseurs musulmans; see also below commentary to paragraph 20 and the term *ḥiss al-fiṭra* in commentary to paragraphs 22, 29, 32.

19–20 “Makes them perform. . . , they have no power to operate”: *taṣrīf*, *taṣarruf* are key concepts which appear in *Epistle on contemplation* more frequently than in *Book of letters*. They highlight the hierarchical scheme in which a higher level of existence governs lower ones and manipulates them, while the lower levels are totally subjugated (*musakhkhara*) to the higher ones. The concept of the subjugation (*taskhīr*) of heavenly and earthly created beings is prevalent in the Qurʾān; see 16:12–16; 22:65; 31:20; 43:13; 45:12. This idea comes through clearly also in the following citation from Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Muqābasāt* (*al-Muqābasa al-rābiʿa wa-l-ʿishrūn fī al-ṭabīʿa*), p. 176: المعنى الذي خصت الطبيعة به من قبولها من النفس وانقيادها لتصرفها وانفعالها بتفعلها... وهذا شأن النفس مع العقل... Another key concept that belongs to Ibn Masarra’s vocabulary of subjugation is *mazmūm* (harnessed). This term evokes the image of the harness (*zimām*) in the guiding, controlling hands of the charioteer in Plato’s *Phaedrus* — see below, commentary to paragraphs 27–28. For occurrences of *zimām* and its derivatives in this text, see paragraphs 20, 23, 26, 30, 38.

20 “Individuals (*ashkhāṣ*)”: this expression, in the sense of heavenly entities and in the cosmological context, goes back to the Arabic translation of the Aristotelian corpus; see, for instance, C. Petraitis, *The Arabic version of Aristotle’s Meteorology*, p. 22 (*al-falak wa-ashkhāṣuḥu*). It is found frequently in the *Rasāʾil ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ*; see, for instance, *al-risāla al-thālitha*, vol. 1, p. 146 (*al-ashkhāṣ al-fādila al-nayyira allatī hiya al-kawākib al-thābita*) *et passim*. For *ashkhāṣ* in the Jābirian corpus, see Jābir b. Ḥayyān, *Mukhtār rasāʾil*, *al-maqāla al-thāniyya min Kitāb al-baḥth*, pp. 506ff. On their purport in the Jābirian system, see P. Lory, “Eschatologie alchimique chez Jābir ibn Ḥayyān,” especially p. 75.

21 “When he roams in the lower world”: the description of the process of observing, questioning and learning as “mental roaming” appears also in the works of other Andalusī thinkers: see, for instance, Ibn Ṭufayl, *Ḥayy b. Yaqzān*, p. 134: وانه لما عاد إلى العالم الخسوس بعد جولانه حيث جال، سئم تكاليف الحياة الدنيا واشتد شوقه إلى الحياة القصوى. Indeed, the notion of mental roaming is even more central in Ibn Ṭufayl’s work than his actual use of derivatives of *j-w-l* would indicate; for *jawalān afkārīnā fī maḥall al-rūḥāniyyīn*, see *Rasāʾil ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ*, vol. 1, pp. 159, 173. This notion appears also in Hebrew garb in Maimonides’s *Laws of idolatry*, in the context of Abraham’s mental search of his creator: “He started roaming in his mind. . . and his heart was roaming and understanding” (“התחיל לשוטט בדעתו... וליבו משוטט ומבין... 1”); see

Mishneh Torah, Avoda Zara 1:8. On Abraham as a model of a contemplator, see also below commentary to paragraph 39.

“This is an encompassing sphere, the sphere of the soul, the world of the soul” هذا فلك محيط فلك النفس عالم النفس: for *falak al-naḥs*, *falak al-ʿaql*, cf. *dāʿirat al-naḥs*, *dāʿirat al-ʿaql*, in *Rasāʾil ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ*, vol. 4, pp. 199ff; also the concept of the *dāʿiratānī muḥīṭatānī* in what follows in the 49th epistle and its concern with the hierarchical association of *naḥs*, *ʿaql* and *ṭabīʿa*. This epistle is central for the appraisal of the intellectual background of Ibn Masarra and for his association with this neoplatonic type of mystical philosophy rather than with Ṣūfism.

22 “He then finds the place of the footstool and the place of the spirit to be permanent and encompassing”: on the encompassing spirit (*al-rūḥ al-muḥīṭ*), see also *Book of letters*, Jaʿfar, pp. 341, 342, 343. The attribute “permanent (*qāʾim*)” recalls the *qayyūm* of *āyat al-kursī*, as can be seen also in paragraphs 41, 43 where other forms of the same root (*q-w-m*) appear, implying a transitive meaning of the verb, perhaps with echoes of the Hebrew root; see A. Jeffrey, *The foreign vocabulary of the Qurʾān*, pp. 244–245 (*qayyūm*).

23 “The observer turns his vision once more”: repetition is thus a central feature of the practice of *iʿtibār*. The lines that follow recapitulate the lessons derived from the previous observations. Thus we find here a concentration of terms and ideas introduced above.

24 Note that although the subject of discussion is still the universal soul, Ibn Masarra’s language here moves to using attributes of human life such as youth and old age, thus suggesting a correspondence with the individual human soul. This, indeed, becomes explicit in the following line.

25 “Whatever applies to the part applies also to the foundation”: this argument echoes a basic idea used by both *mutakallimūn* and *falāsifa*. It is part of their physical theory and is often used to prove the created nature of everything in the world as well as an argument for the total difference of God from the world; see, for instance, Davidson, “John Philoponus as a source of medieval Islamic and Jewish proofs of creation,” (see commentary to paragraph 16 above), on pp. 370–375; also H.A. Wolfson, *The philosophy of the Kalam*, pp. 392–409. Ibn Masarra, however, grafts this “physical” argument onto a neoplatonic cosmology, as may be reflected in his unusual use of the expression “by virtue of encompassing and holding that which is limited” (بطاقتها للمحدود). (و.بحملها إياه).

“The great soul (*al-naḥs al-kubrā*)”: Ibn Masarra uses this term where other neoplatonic sources would use *al-naḥs al-kullīyya*. Illuminating in this respect is the way Ibn Masarra speaks of the intellect. In *Epistle*

on contemplation, “intellect” (*al-ʿaql*) appears without any adjective. In *Book of letters*, however, which is probably a later composition, Ibn Masarra speaks of the “universal intellect” (*al-ʿaql al-kullī*) and connects it once to the “universal soul” (*al-naḥs al-kullīyya* — see *Book of letters*, Jaʿfar, p. 315; see also text, paragraph 33) and once to the “great soul” (*al-naḥs al-kubrā*, see *Book of letters*, Jaʿfar, p. 343). Note Ibn Masarra’s predilection for using the attribute *al-kubrā*: *āyāt Allāh al-kubrā* (paragraph 9), *al-rūḥ al-kubrā* (paragraph 22), *al-naḥs al-kubrā* (paragraphs 25, 29 and *Book of letters*, Jaʿfar, pp. 326, 330, 342 and 343), *al-mashīʾa al-kubrā* (paragraph 29 and *Book of letters*, Jaʿfar, p. 344), *al-nār al-kubrā* (paragraph 46). This, evidently, is in order to underscore the notion to which this attribute is appended against another notion which shares the same name but not the same magnitude. The adjective “great” thus seems to indicate for him cosmic, universal entities.

26 Ibn Masarra seems to complete here an idea implied in an unquoted part of the verse which he has cited a few lines above (Qurʾān 67:4, see paragraph 23). This unquoted part contains the adjectives *khāsiʾ* and *ḥasīr* (“shamed and lost”). When Ibn Masarra uses here the adjective *ḥāsira*, he seems to conflate the two scriptural adjectives. This may indicate that Ibn Masarra is loosely quoting from memory; for this possibility, see also commentary to paragraphs 15 and 40.

27–28 “The essence of this soul is motion... motion and life belong to her essence”: this understanding goes back to Aristotelian definitions which circulated in various forms in Arabic philosophical texts; see, for instance, Isaac Israeli, “The book of definitions” in A. Altmann and S.M. Stern, *Isaac Israeli. A neoplatonic philosopher of the early tenth century*, p. 51.

“Submission to the intellect”: the dependence of the soul upon the intellect is an important theme for Ibn Masarra. Beyond the hierarchical relationship between the intellect and the soul as defined by emanation, Ibn Masarra insists on the total submission and obedience of the soul to the intellect. The soul is subservient (*maʾmūra*), she does not have an independent ability to choose (*maslūbat al-ikhtiyār*) and her will (*irāda*) is governed by the choice of the intellect. Such insistence seems to echo Platonic ethics which teaches the soul to submit its passions to the control of the intellect; see, for instance, Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246a–b, 253c–254e. This stands in opposition to Asín Palacios’s suggestion that the soul, according to Ibn Masarra, is a free agent; see *Ibn Masarra and his school*, pp. 85–86.

29–34 “There exists a power (*quwwa*) which encompasses the great soul and corresponds to her (*muṭābiqatun lahā*)”: Ibn Masarra views the hierarchical scheme of existence as concentric layers the higher encompassing

the lower and corresponding to it. Thus, as he says, “the intellect corresponds to the soul and the soul to the body” (paragraph 32). The same close correspondence between intellect and soul appears, in similar terminology, in a fragment of the original Arabic text of Ibn Gabirol’s *Fons Vitae*, preserved in Moses Ibn Ezra’s *Maqālat al-ḥadīqa*: *Wa-’l-naḥs taḥḥamu al-‘aql wa-in kāna faḥḥā li-anna al-‘aql muḥākīl li-’l-naḥs wa-muṭābiq lahā wa-min aḥḥā amkanahā al-‘ilm bihi* (*Fons Vitae* I, 5); see P.B. Fenton, *Philosophie et exégèse dans le jardin de la métaphore de Moïse Ibn Ezra*, Appendix I: Citations du *Fons Vitae* d’Ibn Gabirol, p. 394.

Closely connected to the adjective *muṭābiq/a* are two other adjectives which Ibn Masarra uses almost synonymously: *muḥīt* (encompassing) and *mubāshir* (in direct contact — see also commentary to paragraph 32). What lies beyond the intellect, although it encompasses it in some way, is totally transcendent: it has no direct contact with anything and, to use Ibn Masarra’s phrasing, “his encompassing (*iḥāṭa*) should be above all encompassing, and his loftiness above all loftiness” (paragraph 33). It follows that it has no correspondence with anything (*muṭābaqa*), hence our emendation of the text: *فما كان فوق الحدود [غير] مطابق له*. Our emendation is further supported by the following fragment from Ibn Gabirol’s original Arabic text of the *Fons Vitae*: *innamā kāna ‘ilm al-dhāt mumtani‘an li-annahū faḥḥa kullī shay’ wa-li-annahā ghayr mutanāhiya wa-hiya ghayr muṭābiqa li-’l-‘aql wa-lā muḥākila lahu*; see Fenton, *ibid.* For Ibn Masarra’s use of the root *ṭ-b-q*, see also *Book of letters*, Ja‘far, pp. 327, 342.

29 “They say... they find...”: cf. paragraph 22, where Ibn Masarra, in dealing with a similar structure, uses the singular *fa-wajada*. By moving to the plural forms *fa-qālū... fa-wajadū*, Ibn Masarra may indicate here that the conflation of Qur’ānic and philosophical terms stretches beyond the individual contemplator and is typical of the philosophical tradition at large.

“Intellect” and “throne” (*‘aql* and *‘arsh*): Implicitly, Ibn Masarra associates here the philosophic intellect with the scriptural throne as well as with “the supreme decrees and the great volition.” This association is typical of Ibn Masarra’s philosophical mystical system; it may suggest possible intellectual traditions from which he could have drawn and can serve as an indicator for identifying his followers; see also commentary to paragraph 41.

“The supreme decrees (*al-maqādīr al-‘ulā*)”: here in the sense of “divine decrees”; for a similar use, see below paragraph 41 and *Book of letters*, Ja‘far, pp. 327, 331 and 332.

“The great volition (*al-mashī’a al-kubrā*)”: Ibn Masarra clearly distin-

guishes between two kinds of divine will: *mashī'a* and *irāda*. This distinction transpires especially from the very last lines of *Book of letters*, Ja'far, p. 344, where, with regard to the symbolism of letters, Ibn Masarra says: "*Mīm* is [in] the fourth position — it is the great volition (*al-mashī'a al-kubrā*); the potentiality in which all things, good and bad, laudable and reprehensible, inhere. Then [in] the fifth position is *alif* — it is the will of God (*irādat Allāh*), the exalted, by which He consolidated what He willed (*aḥkama mā shā'a*) and by which He created creation — it is the first thing (*awwal al-ashyā'*) to have appeared." In the hierarchical scheme of things, therefore, *irāda*, which determines *mashī'a*, stands higher and is the most elevated hypostasis in the process of creation. For the significance of the hypostasis of divine will in monotheistic neoplatonic systems, see Introduction.

For the epithet *al-kubrā*, see above, commentary to paragraph 25.

31 "Notions (*khawāṭir*) which occur not from its essence, whence it does not know": these notions are fleeting thoughts which occur without a coherent, systematic thinking process. It is often associated with physical or sensual prompting and implies therefore an intellectual and moral limitation; see, for instance, E.W. Lane, *Arabic-English lexicon*, vol. 1, p. 705, and compare Peters, *God's created speech*, pp. 63–65, 194. Ṣūfī sources refer to *khawāṭir* at times in a positive and at times in a negative sense; see, for example, al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya: bāb al-khawāṭir* (no. 21), pp. 83–84; see also al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *Nawādir al-uṣūl*, p. 400 (*al-aṣl al-rābi' wa-'l-sab'un wa-'l-miatān*): *al-yaqīn... yudhību khawāṭir al-shakk wa-'l-shirk*; also *Hilyat al-awliyā'*, vol. 10, p. 319 (on Ruwaym b. Aḥmad): *kānat ḥarakātuhum 'an al-ḥaqq bi-'l-ḥaqq fī jamī' al-aḥkām lā ta'tarīduhā khawāṭir al-bashariyya*.

"Humiliation and subjugation (*al-tadhīl wa-'l-mamlaka*)": for *mamlaka* in this sense, see above, commentary to paragraph 18; see also below, commentary to paragraph 38.

32 "They have not found him [to be] in direct contact with anything": direct contact pertains to entities which have limits and bounds (*maḥdūd*). Such entities also act upon one another by applying direct contact, while the transcendent acts differently: in Ibn Masarra's language it acts by "descent" (*nuzūl*), which is clearly a reference to divine emanation. Ibn Masarra does not use this term for the emanation of the intellect upon the soul. Compare, however, Maimonides, who defines emanation (*faḥd*) as the way all immaterial entities act, in particular the separate intellects — see *Guide* II, 12 (*Dalālat al-ḥā'irīn*, p. 194, l. 20–p. 195, l. 3; Pines, p. 279).

"They have found": here, as above, Ibn Masarra abruptly moves from the singular to the plural; see above commentary to paragraph 29 and

below commentary to paragraph 47.

33 “For the imaginings (*awhām*) are the intellects (*‘uqūl*) which resemble things that take the image of the models (*amthila*)”: It seems that for Ibn Masarra the intellects are functioning also as imagination. Our translation, if correct, aligns Ibn Masarra with the Arabic Platonists who use *amthila* as a reference to the Platonic ideas. Note that in *Book of letters*, *mithāl* is used in a narrower technical sense of “model” whereas here it remains closer to *mathal* and hence “similitude” (see *Book of letters*, Ja‘far, p. 330). This difference may reflect Ibn Masarra’s passage from a more theological, or Kalāmī discourse with echoes of Mu‘tazilī ideas, to a more mature mystical-philosophical discourse with clearer echoes of Late Antique neoplatonism. Such a development in Ibn Masarra’s thought corroborates our earlier assumption that *Book of letters* is a later composition (see above, commentary to paragraph 25).

“Encompassing (*ihāṭa*)...above all encompassing”: Viewing existence as composed of concentric spheres is a pivotal idea for Ibn Masarra as also for many of the medieval Arabic neoplatonists, such as Ibn Gabirol: see *Fons Vitae* I, 2 and III, 57; al-Baṭalyawsī: see M. Asín Palacios, “Ibn al-Ṣīd de Badajoz y su Libro de los cercos (*Kitāb al-ḥadā’iq*)”; *Rasā’il ikhwān al-ṣafā’*, see, for instance, vol. 4, p. 239 *et passim*; In *Epistle on contemplation*, Ibn Masarra focuses on the ontological, cosmographic aspect of *ihāṭa*. In *Book of letters*, however, *ihāṭa* is central to his epistemology, where it designates God’s all-encompassing knowledge (see *Book of letters*, Ja‘far, p. 312). This latter use of *ihāṭa* is also attested in the above mentioned neoplatonic texts: see S. Pines, “*Arugat Habossem* — the fragments of the [Arabic original of] *Fons Vitae*”, on p. 48; P.B. Fenton, *Philosophie et exégèse*, pp. 394–395, 400 (for Ibn Gabirol’s fragments, see also above, commentary to paragraphs 29–34).

“Sayings may change, but the truth does not change”: The “changing sayings” may refer to the variety of similitudes and images used in prophetic language; cf. Maimonides, *Guide* II, 36–37 (*Dalālat al-ḥā’irīn*, pp. 260–265; Pines, pp. 369–375); R. Walzer, *al-Fārābī on the perfect state: Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī’s Mabādī’ ārā’ ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila*, chapter 14, pp. 219–227; see also above, paragraph 10.

34 “*Rubūbiyya*,” see *‘ilm al-rubūbiyya* in *Book of letters*, Ja‘far, p. 312; see also above, commentary to paragraph 3.

“...He has no parts; and he has no limit, nor does (any of it) enter into his oneness”: This may echo the definitions of One in theological and philosophical literature, which insist on the fact that His being one is unlike any other one, and in particular, that his oneness is simple and not composite. See, for instance, al-Muqammiṣ, *‘Ishrūn maqāla*, chapter 8, pp. 164–171, especially pp. 166–167; al-Kindī, *Fī al-falsafa al-ūlā*, p. 131.

35 "...self-subsistent...contingent upon another (*qā'im bi-nafsihi* ... *bi-ghayrihi*)": The distinction between substance (*jawhar*), which is defined as self-subsistent, and accident (*ʿaraḍ*), which is defined as contingent upon another, is typical of theological *kalām* terminology; for an early example, see al-Muqammiṣ, *Ishrūn maqāla*, chapter 4, p. 87. Similar distinctions can be found also in philosophical literature; see, for instance, *Rasā'il ikhwān al-ṣafā'*: *هو قضاء هو جوهر قائم بنفسه* vol. 2, p. 13; *فان قيل فما الجوهر فيقال: هو قائم بنفسه القابل للصفات* see vol. 3, p. 385; *موجودات عقلية مجردة من الهيولى كل واحد منها قائم بنفسه* vol. 4, p. 131. The *mutakallimūn* also dwell on the fact that this distinction implies God's necessary difference from His creatures; see, for example al-Muqammiṣ, *Ishrūn maqāla*, chapter 8, p. 157. Ibn Masarra does not dwell on the argumentation; rather, he leaves these ideas implicit by using the theological and philosophical vocabulary. He seems to be nourished by various terminologies and concepts, but does not show an affiliation to any of the systems from which they derive.

36 For God's transcendence and being above "intermediaries," see also below, commentary to paragraph 41. For Qur'ān 42:11 (*laysa ka-mithlihi shay'un*), see also text, paragraph 40.

"*Hāl*," lit. "state." In this context, however, the term denotes what is not of the essence, hence the attributes, as in Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā'ī's theory of *aḥwāl*; see, for instance, L. Gardet, "al-Djubbā'ī", *EF²*, s.v.

"Yet He is with all things": this reads like a paraphrase of Qur'ān 58:7: *هو معهم أين ما كانوا*.

37 The single, extant manuscript, sometimes lacking diacritical points, leaves some open questions regarding the correct reading of the text. In our reading, Ibn Masarra moves from first to second to third person. Another difficulty is the following puzzling sentence where the manuscript has: *وتجد به من العقول إلى ما فوقه مثل ما وجدت ما تحته من الفقر إليه*.

In our understanding, the text requires here a *maṣdar* synonymous with *faqr*. Such a *maṣdar* can be found in *al-ʿuqūl ilā* in the sense of "to find shelter with": see *Lisān al-ʿArab*, *ʿ-q-l*: *ʿaqala ilā ʿuqūlan = laja'a*; see also Lane, *An Arabic-English lexicon*, vol. 5, p. 2113: "*ʿaqala ilayhi*, inf. *ʿaql* and *ʿuqūl*: He betook himself to him, or it, for refuge, protection, cover or lodging." This use is somewhat unusual and there remains the possibility that the text is here corrupt. Be that as it may, Ibn Masarra establishes a series of dependencies of the lower on the higher. This dependency includes all existents but God.

For "ultimate truth" (*al-ḥaqq al-aqṣā*), see also above, commentary to paragraph 10.

38 "...You will behold His innermost court (*sāḥat qurbihi*)": for this image, see Ibn Gabirol, *Keter malkhut*, 8:70 (I. Levin, *The crown of*

kingship, p. 260). See also Maimonides's Parable of the Palace, *Guide* III, 51 (*Dalālat al-ḥā'irīn*, p. 456, ll. 3, 26; Pines, pp. 619–620).

“His entire kingdom”: *malakūt* here denotes the universe. Ibn Masarra's description of *malakūt* as “bound by His harness, restricted by His encompassing...” makes it evident that, rather than denoting God's majesty as the term regularly does, in Ibn Masarra's vocabulary in *Epistle on contemplation*, it belongs to the semantic field of subjugation, as does *mamlaka*; see above, commentary to paragraphs 18, 31. In *Book of letters*, Ja'far, p. 331, however, Ibn Masarra says: “He harnessed them by His kingship... everything is in His grasp” (زَمَّهَا بِمَلَكُوتِهِ... كُلُّ شَيْءٍ فِي قَبْضَتِهِ). It is apparent that in this sentence, Ibn Māsarra combines the image of “harnessing” with *malakūt* in the more usual sense of divine kingship; see also above, commentary to paragraphs 19–20.

“Constrained by His will and volition”: For *irāda wa-mashī'a*, see commentary to paragraphs 29, 30.

39 In these lines, Ibn Masarra expresses a negative evaluation of those who go by the name of philosophers. He criticizes their methodology which lacks firm intention and which leads to erroneous conclusions. He also attacks them for using, without understanding, ideas borrowed from others (“something which they had heard... something whose imprint [*rasmahu*] they had found”). He describes them as “those who speak pretentiously” (see further below). This negative evaluation should nevertheless be seen in the context of other statements where he insists on the concordance of philosophy with prophecy; see above, commentary to paragraph 10; also *Book of letters*, Ja'far, pp. 315 and 330. For an ambivalent attitude of the Ikhwān to the philosophers, see *Rasā'il ikhwān al-ṣafā'*, vol. 4, pp. 177ff. On this topic, see also I.R. Netton, *Muslim neoplatonists*, chapter 3, pp. 32–52.

“Those who speak pretentiously (*al-mutanaffi'ūn*)”: the manuscript (f. 187: alt.) has *السطعون* without any diacritical points. Ja'far emends and reads *al-mutanaḍḍūn* (p. 357). In a prophetic tradition, which appears in several of the canonical collections, the prophet curses the *mutanaffi'ūn* (those who speak pompously) without identifying them: see, for instance, Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 4, p. 2055. Some of the later sources provide an identification which highlights the rationalistic bend of those cursed; see, for instance, al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, vol. 1, p. 88: *halaka al-mutanaffi'ūn, ayy al-muta'ammiqūn fī al-baḥth wa-'l-istiṣā'*; see also *Lisān al-ʿArab*: n-ṭ-ʿ: *halaka al-mutanaffi'ūn, hum al-muta'ammiqūn al-mughālūn fī al-kalām*, vol. 8, p. 357.

For Abraham as a model of a contemplator, see above, commentary to paragraph 21; for a reference to Abraham's search for knowledge as a model for the friends of God, see *Rasā'il ikhwān al-ṣafā'*, vol. 3, p. 531;

see also Introduction.

40 “Then the prophets...came forth and said”: Reiterating the prophets’ mission to proclaim God’s oneness and transcendence allows Ibn Masarra to continue his discourse with emphatic reliance on Qur’ānic phraseology.

Your Lord is God who created you and those before you: Ibn Masarra seems to quote Qur’ān 2:21. The canonical text, however, has “O People! Worship your Lord who created you and those before you.” Such a deviation is in line with previously observed instances where Ibn Masarra quotes Qur’ānic verses loosely; see above, commentary to paragraphs 23, 26.

41 Quoting Scripture as regards creation in the preceding lines, allows Ibn Masarra to proceed to discussing the first and loftiest entities in the chain of creation. It is noteworthy that the scriptural and traditional language reiterated here is combined with theological-philosophical terminology, to which we have already become exposed. Speaking about the throne (‘*arsh*) and about the footstool (‘*kursī*) which, according to Qur’ān 2:255, comprises the heavens and the earth and preserves them, Ibn Masarra’s phraseology paraphrases scriptural language: *kursiyyuhu alladhī wasi‘a al-samawāt wa-l-ard wa-huwa ḥāfiẓuhumā wa-qayyimuhumā*. At the same time, he also describes the throne in philosophical terms as encompassing, transcending and harnessing all existents (*muḥīṭ bi-l-ashyā’ kullihā ‘ālin fawqahā zāmm lahā*) and the footstool as functioning without effort or intermediaries (*dūna kulfa aw mubāshara*); see also above, commentary to paragraphs 7, 22, 29 and below, commentary to paragraph 47. Note that according to Ibn Ḥazm, *Fīṣal*, vol. 5, p. 66, Ismā‘īl al-Ru‘aynī, Ibn Masarra’s follower, attributed to Ibn Masarra the belief that the throne is the true governor of the world, as God is too lofty for being described as acting at all (إن العرش هو المدير للعالم وإن الله تعالى أجل من أن يوصف بفعل شيء أصلاً). The centrality of the throne in Ibn Masarra’s philosophy is attested also in the writing of Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, eds. ‘Uthmān Yaḥyā and Ibrāhīm Madkūr, p. 348 (paragraph 545) and p. 355 (paragraph 557); see S. Stroumsa, “Ibn Masarra and the beginnings of mystical thought in al-Andalus,” especially pp. 103–104; see also *Book of letters*, Ja‘far, pp. 332, 333, 334, 336 and 340.

“The first to be created were the throne and the water”: The way Ibn Masarra conceives of the beginning of creation and the first created beings seems to derive from Qur’ān 11:7: *His throne was upon the water*, a verse which he quotes in *Book of letters*, Ja‘far, p. 333.

“Within the throne He inscribed all His decrees (*maqādir*) and rulings”: In *Book of letters*, Ibn Masarra identifies the throne with the tablet (*al-*

lawh): see *Book of letters*, Jaʿfar, pp. 332 and 333; this is “the tablet in which He wrote all the decrees (*maqādir*)” — see *Book of letters*, Jaʿfar, p. 327.

42 “He is closer to everything than its own self”: this is a probable allusion to Qurʾān 50:16 (ونحن أقرب إليه من حبل الوريد) and Qurʾān 56:85 (ونحن أقرب إليه منكم).

“He created these seven heavens below His throne in six days”: for an elaboration on the theme of creation in six days, see *Book of letters*, Jaʿfar, p. 333. For Ibn Masarra, the Sabbath is the seventh day in which God sat upright upon the throne (Qurʾān 11:7). For Jewish echoes in Ibn Masarra’s understanding of the seventh day of rest, see Stroumsa, “Ibn Masarra and the beginnings of mystical thought in al-Andalus,” pp. 109–110.

43–44 “Everything that He created in His heavens and His earth He made as signs indicating Him”: Towards the end of his epistle, IM resumes the terminology and theme with which he has opened it. This circular style reflects, no doubt, the image of the general scheme of things, which is circular and encompassing.

“Will see this in himself and, with him, also in everything in the world”: This is, no doubt, an allusion to Qurʾān 41:53 (سنريهم آياتنا في الأفاق) (وفي أنفسهم); see also above, commentary to paragraph 3.

44 “The first indicating the last and the last indicating the first; the external supporting the inner and the inner the external”: This is clearly an allusion to Qurʾān 57:3 (هو الأول والآخر والظاهر والباطن). It is noteworthy that, for Ibn Masarra, contemplation of the signs of creation is closely tied with the contemplation of God’s beautiful names and attributes. The particular divine names mentioned here serve to remind the contemplator of the interconnectedness (*ittiṣāl*) that inheres in all levels of creation.

“The signs testify to it all and tell it (*naṭāqat bihi*)”: On the “telling” signs, see *Book of letters*, Jaʿfar, p. 334: “These are the letters by which God spoke (*naṭāqa Allāh bihā*) before creation.”

45 “. . . in either a detailed or a comprehensive way”: *tafṣīl al-āyāt* which we saw above regarding natural phenomena (paragraph 6) finds its correspondence here in the verses of the Qurʾān.

46 “The great fire”: The text here seems to be corrupt. The manuscript has النار السبكي. Jaʿfar and Garrido Clemente read السفلى. Our reading is based on the fact that the only adjective appended to *nār* in the Qurʾān is *al-nār al-kubrā* (Qurʾān 87:12); for Ibn Masarra’s predilection for the epithet *al-kubrā*, see above commentary to paragraph 25.

“. . . it will leave the haven entirely and will have no refuge but the great fire, for it has withdrawn from God’s protection”: Here and in the fol-

lowing lines, Ibn Masarra strings together a cluster of terms indicating protection from punishment and hellfire for those who merit God's protective closeness (*wilāyat Allāh*). As above in paragraph 5, here, too, eschatological aspects are closely intertwined with contemplation.

47 "...holds on to it by the cords (*asbāb*)": The term *asbāb* means "ropes of a tent" as well as "causes and effects" in a logical sequence. Here, too, the use of the term reinforces the link between the intellectual process of *i'tibār* and divine salvation. For this term in the Qur'ān, see Qur'ān 40:36–37, 38:10, 2:166, 22:15; for the interpretation of this term as "heavenly ropes" leading to the divine realm, see K. van Bladel, "Heavenly cords and prophetic authority in the Qur'ān and its late antique context," pp. 223–246.

"He reveals Himself to those who approach (يتجلى على القدامين)": the manuscript has قدامين with, seemingly, a short *a*, but we read *qādimīn*, namely: "those who approach." The text, however, remains problematic, in particular since the next word, *wa-yatabawwa'u*, is a verb in the singular; for Ibn Masarra's possible tendency to shift between the singular and the plural, see above, commentary to paragraphs 29, 32.

The form تجلى على is less regular than تجلى ل, but it can nevertheless be attested to in various sources; see, for instance, al-Majlisī, *Bihār al-anwār*, vol. 55, p. 38: تجلى على العارفين بصفات كماله.

"They enter God's sanctuary where He shelters His friends": Ibn Masarra ends the epistle in a celebratory note by bringing a cluster of expressions and prooftexts which speak about the salvation of the friends of God.

"... He shelters His friends (*awliyā'*) who... look to be sheltered by Him": the text here seems to be corrupt and it is possible that a few words are missing. The manuscript reads المنظرين. Ja'far emends to الناظرين; Garrido Clemente emends to المنتظرين. Our translation is *ad sensum*.

Note that the term *awliyā'*, which modern scholarship tends to associate with Ṣūfism (see, for instance, C. Addas, "Andalusī mysticism and the rise of Ibn 'Arabī," p. 916), does not, in fact, necessarily indicate a Ṣūfī affiliation, neither in general nor in Ibn Masarra's works in particular; see Introduction.

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